

Introduction to the Doctrine of Creation In its Historical Developments Excerpted from: Participating in God: Trinity and Creation *

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The first step toward a contemporary theology of creation is to examine the doctrine of creation in its historical unfolding. This is because Christian doctrine has an irreducibly traditional character. The Christian faith is an ongoing dialogue with its own past. It continues to exist and to be faithful to itself only by engaging the formative steps in its historical becoming. Although it does not owe obsequious servitude to its past, it is nothing without that past. Without standing in that tradition-- it is no longer the *Christian* faith. For these reasons, a grasp of the doctrine's past is needed if we are to see what the doctrine's present can and must be.

The point of departure for considering the history of the doctrine of creation is the Bible. But immediately it is necessary to remind ourselves of the special character of the Bible. Doctrines such as creation scarcely appear in the Bible in didactic form. The Bible does not present a systematic and comprehensive doctrine of creation. Instead convictions about creation are embedded in the Bible's narrative framework.¹ As a result, the Bible never treats creation as a self-contained doctrine.² Instead the Genesis-account of creation is the prelude to the history of God with a particular people and with the rest of the created order. The creation-event points forward to the ultimate restoration and recreation of all things in Revelation just as, in John's Gospel, the appearance of Jesus Christ looks back to and recapitulates the creative beginning of God's acts in Genesis. For this reason, the account of creation narrated in Genesis must not be abstracted from its place in the Bible and its function as the prelude must always be kept in mind. Doing so will help us avoid thinking of the first chapters of Genesis as *the* Biblical doctrine of creation.

This point can be stated more explicitly by noting that the Bible always draws the closest connection between creation and redemption. Not only is creation the prelude to redemption, but redemption is consistently understood in light of creation. For example, Psalms such as 18:16-17 and 124:1-5 describe redemption as being rescued from the waters of destruction, a clear allusion to the chaos from which, according to Genesis, God creates the ordered world and by which the world is constantly threatened. In a different way, Isaiah represents the return of Israel from captivity in Babylon in terms reminiscent of creation. In 42:5-9 it is the creator who does the new thing of restoring the fortunes of Israel. In 44:26-27 this same creator is the redeemer, who decrees that Jerusalem will once again be inhabited and overcomes the chaos of destruction as in the primordial quelling of the threatening waters. In 45:18 the creator declares that the world was created for habitation and not to be a chaos. Finally, 51:9-11 announces that the redeemed Israelite community will be enabled to return to Jerusalem just as in the Exodus God parted the waters of the sea, thus making a way of deliverance. Not surprisingly, Paul's letters (e.g., 2 Corinthians 2:15) and Revelation (21:1) take up this theme of the new creation in ways that unmistakably refer us back to Genesis and other creation passages in the Bible. Another creation motif is the image of God. This prominent idea, first enunciated in Genesis 1:26, is adopted in the New Testament to refer to Jesus Christ and the saving effects of Jesus Christ. Paul in particular sees redemption as the restoration of the image of God (e.g., Colossians 3:10) in which humanity was first created, an image that is identical with Jesus (e.g., 2 Corinthians. 4:4 and Col. 1:15). Jesus Christ is also prominent in the New Testament as the agent of God's creation. John 1:3, Hebrews 1:2 and Colossians 1:15-16 all identify Jesus as the creator of all things, probably reflecting the teaching of Proverbs 8 about the role of God's wisdom in creation.

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The importance of these observations is that the Biblical teaching about creation should not be abstracted from its setting in and connection with the larger narrative scheme of the Bible. The Bible does not, in fact, have a doctrine of creation, if by doctrine we mean an enclosed idea that can be inspected in isolation from other doctrines. Instead the Bible presents the doctrine of creation as part of an interconnected web of beliefs, each of which can be understood only in terms of the others.

We are now in a position to state emphatically what the doctrine of creation is not and cannot be. First, it is a mistake to treat the doctrine of creation as though it were simply the description of an event in the past. Although one may, on the basis of scientific theories, associate the creation-event with the so-called Big Bang, the Christian doctrine of creation is not only and not even primarily about the Big Bang. To identify creation narrowly with a physical event would mean losing the Bible's sense of the intimate relation between creation and redemption and treating the doctrine as a quasi-scientific account of an event in the past. Although a doctrine of creation may be identified with a past event in which the universe came to be, the *Christian* doctrine of creation cannot be.

Second, the doctrine of creation is not a *theory* about the universe. Although it might conceivably suggest a research program in one of the sciences, the doctrine is not itself a theory. It is neither testable nor falsifiable in the customary scientific senses of the terms. Also, it cannot be brought into a logical relation with accepted scientific theories; it does not entail any particular scientific theory and is not entailed by any particular theory. Further, it is impossible to adopt the objective and dispassionate attitude toward the subject matter of the doctrine as is required in the physical sciences. Regardless of how passionately a scientist may embrace a theory and how significant the theory is believed to be, the scientific method and community are committed to a dispassionate and critical attitude toward theories. Such an attitude is necessary if theories are to be properly tested in a scientific way. But a doctrine such as creation is held in a different way because it is an integral and fundamental part of the Christian faith and life. With a few exceptions, scientific theories can be changed and belief in them discontinued without extensively altering the rest of our beliefs. Adopting or rejecting the geological theory of plate tectonics has widespread ramifications in the field of geology and related fields, but probably leaves one's overall world-view unaffected and most likely would not alter one's daily practices. Adopting or rejecting the doctrine of creation, however, is existentially a more serious matter, for doing so would affect the full scope of our world-view and, if our lives are consistent with our beliefs, and our practice. Of course, the fact that the doctrine of creation is not a theory and not held by us in a dispassionate manner does not mean that believers must cling to it dogmatically and groundlessly in the face of all evidence. Our understanding of the doctrine of creation should be informed by the physical sciences and it is certainly possible for clear and convincing evidence and arguments to strengthen or weaken one's convictions. However, because the doctrine of creation is such an integral part of the Christian faith, it is not belief in creation alone but the entire structure of the Christian faith and life that would be strengthened or weakened. In short, the doctrine of creation makes existential and ethical demands on us that go far beyond the cognitive demands imposed on us by a sound theory.

Finally, the doctrine of creation is not a metaphysical account of reality, at least if metaphysics is concerned with the most generic features of reality.³ Although the doctrine of creation is interested in the whole of reality, that interest is concerned more with the creator of that reality and with the creator's importance for our lives than with the universal categories and features of reality. Naturally, it is to be expected that any particular *exposition* of the doctrine of creation will, intentionally or not, make use of some metaphysical assumptions. It may even expressly employ a metaphysical theory. There is nothing illegitimate in this; such attempts must be judged by means of the usual canons of philosophical argumentation. However, the doctrine itself does not depend on any particular metaphysical scheme and does not entail any particular metaphysics.

Having explored what the doctrine of creation is not, it is appropriate to ask, at first in a general way, what it is. The place to begin is with an understanding of the Christian faith as such. The Christian faith embraces the dialectical relation of thinking and practice. On the one hand this means that we can draw a distinction between the cognitive and the practical dimensions of doctrine. On the other hand, it means that this distinction is artificial, for there is no authentic Christian thought without a corresponding practice and no right practice without sound thinking. Thought and practice are two complementary components of the one Christian life and faith.

This analysis admits of further refinement. We may distinguish three dimensions of the Christian faith. These are the regulative, the hermeneutical and the ethical dimensions.⁴

The regulative dimension of faith takes the form of doctrines such as we find formally in creeds and official statements and also in liturgies and hymns. In their regulative aspect, these doctrines perform two functions that are pertinent to this discussion. First, any given doctrine may support another doctrine, thus exhibiting the systematic character of the Christian faith. For example, the medieval theologian Anselm argued that the doctrine of atonement makes sense only if the Christological doctrine of Christ's two natures is true. Second, doctrines perform a defining function that arises from the need of the community to distinguish itself from what it regards as aberrant views by giving expression to its most central convictions. In this way it defines itself in relation to other communities and world-views. It defines the boundaries that distinguish it from other systems of beliefs and establishes the rules that regulate appropriate Christian thought and action.⁵

The hermeneutical dimension of the Christian faith is the attempt by the community to understand its beliefs and practices. Understanding occurs when beliefs and practices are thought about through some conceptual scheme. In form, attempts at understanding often appear as systematic theologies, after the model of the great medieval *summas*. In the middle ages there was a persistent and ultimately successful attempt to understand the Christian faith in terms of an Aristotelian framework. This gradually modified the earlier tradition of understanding that incorporated, for the most part, a Platonic conceptual framework. In each case, Christian convictions were understood in terms drawn from a conceptual scheme. In this way, the creator came to be thought of as the first cause of the universe as described in Aristotle's philosophy. Several points deserve note. First, this analysis implies that understanding differs from arriving at the truth. Medieval theologians understood the Christian faith in a certain way; however, it would be difficult for us to claim that their understanding was true. Today, we are likely to understand the Christian faith in terms drawn from modern physical and social sciences. While it is natural for us to be convinced of the truth of our understanding, an assessment sensitive to the history of Christian thought will compel us to refrain from claiming that our views are true in any sort of absolute sense. Second, whereas the regulative dimension of the Christian faith is an act of the entire Christian community (admittedly by its representatives), the task of understanding is undertaken by individuals. Of course, these individuals pursue understanding within the community of faith and often for the benefit of that community. Nonetheless, the task of understanding can be highly idiosyncratic. It may not correspond to the traditional understanding of a given community if it draws on a conceptual system different from that on which the traditional understanding is based. Nonetheless, to the extent that it is intended to be a Christian understanding, the hermeneutical dimension will seek to remain within the boundaries of the regulative.

The regulative and hermeneutical dimensions point to what the Christian tradition has always understood by the phrase 'faith seeking understanding'. A second century Christian, Origen, asserted that, while the apostles stated with great clarity the necessary doctrines of Christianity, they left the rational grounds of their doctrines unexplained so that the wise people of later generations might exercise their thinking.⁶ This position implies a distinction between the teaching of the apostles and the explanation of those teachings to be offered by intellectuals. Christians were obligated to affirm the apostles' teaching but no such authority was attached to later expositions. Whether consciously or unconsciously, this attempt at comprehension has always involved the use of some prevailing philosophical or scientific conceptuality. The Christian tradition, therefore, commonly distinguishes between the faith that consists in the central convictions of Christianity and the understanding of that faith.

The ethical dimension of the Christian faith arises from the fact that the Christian faith is not only not only thought but also practice. Faith is not only a cognitive state of mind but is also a commitment to a certain way of life. That is why the Gospel of John (3:21) can speak of those who do or practice the truth. Truth, in the Christian conception, is not only cognitive. It is also ethical. For this reason, it is not enough to say that Christian doctrine implies an ethics; we must assert that the Christian faith is so connected to ethics that without a commitment to this way of being one cannot be said to believe. Accordingly, part of my exposition of the doctrine of creation will show its connection to certain ethical practice and a way of being in the world. The ethical depends on the regulative dimension in so far as it is intended to be expressly and faithfully Christian. It also depends on the hermeneutical: hermeneutical in so far as it depends on current states of

knowledge, as in the use of natural scientific knowledge to think faithfully about the Church's ecological responsibilities.

Several observations are in order about this analysis of doctrine. First, the analysis of doctrine offered here is not necessarily exhaustive. Other analyses are possible. Other dimensions of the Christian faith may be discerned. However, these three seem to me to be the most pertinent to the doctrine of creation.

Second, the three dimensions that I have enumerated are distinct only within the analysis. None of these is the whole of doctrine. We can speak of them separately only as abstractions from the concrete examples of doctrine in history. No matter how resolutely we attempt to portray, for instance, the doctrine of creation in its regulative dimension, our portrayal is always necessarily associated with some understanding. In the same way, any attempt to understand the Christian doctrine of creation theologically must remain within the bounds of the regulative dimension by thinking with the Christian tradition about its central convictions. Finally, the nature of the Christian faith demands that every doctrine have a corresponding and necessary ethical dimension. Of course, it is to be expected that in any given exposition of a doctrine, one of the dimensions may be more prominent than another. However, it is the theologian's task to set forth the Christian faith in all three of its dimensions.

Third, this analysis addresses the question of doctrinal authority. What is that aspect of the doctrine of creation that, in the words of Vincent of Lerins,⁷ has been believed everywhere, at all times and by all within the community of faith? Which are the persistent elements and which are the transitory?

It is obvious that a doctrine such as creation is not authoritative in its hermeneutical dimension. This dimension is an attempt, by some within the community, to understand. Although it should be faithful to the central convictions of the Christian faith, it is self-consciously a product of the dialogue between the faith and other bodies of knowledge such as science and philosophy. It is, accordingly, a highly contextualized activity. For this reason it has a necessarily transitory quality. Because it arises out of this dialogue and because its dialogue partners (especially the sciences) tend to shift their ground over time, the hermeneutical dimension is historically dynamic. The understanding of doctrine changes over time and culture.⁸ For these reasons, although it is a necessary task, it does not provide the community with results that are authoritative for matters of faith and practice.

The ethical dimension likewise cannot be considered authoritative. Christian practice, in addition to being faithful to the fundamental convictions of the Christian tradition, also is carried on in particular cultural and intellectual contexts. Because of the need to engage in ethical practice in an informed way, expositions of the ethical dimension necessarily draw on current states of knowledge and theory. For this reason, it too is a hermeneutical undertaking and involves the activity of understanding. Accordingly, the ethical task of the Christian faith is dynamic and changing as is the hermeneutical, although not to the same degree. Although there are persistent aspects of Christian ethics, its highly contextualized nature precludes it in itself from being fully authoritative. Otherwise, we would have to continually affirm and live by the sometimes limited ethical sensitivities of the past.

It is the regulative dimension of the Christian faith that is persistent and therefore authoritative. The regulative dimension of doctrine is concerned with drawing boundaries between what is and what is not acceptable belief and practice. As such it gives definition to the community and seeks to state the non-negotiable convictions without which the community cannot maintain itself without loss of identity. However, we should note that what allows the regulative function to be authoritative is its modesty. Whereas in seeking to understand, the theologian is allowed to wander considerably beyond the express statements of the Christian tradition in speculative directions, the classical and regulative statements of doctrine--the creeds--impress us mainly by how much they do not say. Creeds assert that God created the world but none goes much beyond that modest affirmation. The Christian tradition has every right to expect its adherents to embrace this affirmation but in fact they are not being asked to commit themselves to a full-blown metaphysical system or scientific theory. To put the matter another way, the modest affirmation is compatible with many understandings. All Christians will agree that God created the world but if we ask about the more specific content of their belief we will find a great variety of answers. Nonetheless, the regulative dimension is not vacuous; it definitely rules out some beliefs and

practices. I suggest, then, that the authoritative element of doctrine lies in the regulative task. It is this which is the persistent element in the Christian faith.

Before proceeding to the historical development of the doctrine of creation, there remain only a few methodological issues to discuss. The first concerns the scope of the topic. Limitations of space mean that the doctrine of creation can be considered only in its broadest outlines. Many other important subjects will have to be passed by.

The second methodological issue pertains to the mode of exposition of the Biblical passages. These passages present enormous challenges to the interpreter. Issues of dating, setting and authorship remain disputed. As a result, the purpose of the passages can not in every case be precisely ascertained. Limitations of space prevent a thorough review of the issues and possibilities for interpretation. All that can be done is to indicate the scholarly consensus, where there is one, and to restrict the exposition to those aspects of the Biblical teaching that appear to be reasonably assured.

The third issue has already been alluded to. It arises from the fact that the doctrine of creation is intimately connected to other doctrines, notably the doctrine of redemption. This means that any attempt to expound the doctrine of creation that overlooks these connections will be led seriously astray. At the same time, practical limitations prevent an adequate treatment that would demonstrate the full array of connections between the doctrine of creation and the other components of theology. All that can be done is to give the reader some sense of the way in which the doctrine of creation is embedded in the larger scheme of Christian theology. In this way we can periodically remind ourselves of the dangers of focusing too narrowly on texts that are overly about creation and neglecting the way in which creation is merely one part of an integrated body of theological doctrine.

Endnotes

1 These words of warning are apropos of any attempt to extract doctrine from the Bible: “When the content of the narratives and poems is taken out of these forms and shaped into a systematic presentation, a different rendering of faith and its meaning occurs. . . . To give an account of Old Testament faith we need to begin by paying careful attention to the language of the narratives and poems themselves.” “Form, rhetoric, and content belong together, for they are the constituent parts of language. To separate them is to alter the meaning of the text.” Leo G. Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation: The Theology of Wisdom Literature* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 325 and 326.

2 For an orientation to the place of the doctrine of creation in the Biblical narrative, see Bernhard W. Anderson, *Creation Versus Chaos: The Reinterpretation of Mythical Symbolism in the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 35-38 and Bernhard W. Anderson, *From Creation to New Creation: Old Testament Perspectives*, *Overtures to Biblical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 1-4.

3 This view of metaphysics is common to both Alfred North Whitehead and Martin Heidegger. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected ed., edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978), 90, 116 and 219 and Martin Heidegger, “The Way Back Into the Ground of Metaphysics,” in *Existentialism From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, edited and translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: The World Publishing Co., Meridian Books, 1956), 217.

4 This three-fold distinction is not equivalent to core-peripheral distinction, for core-peripheral distinguishes between two sorts of doctrine, one essential, the other not. My point is that it is the one doctrine (e.g., creation) that exhibits all three dimensions. However, we can regard the hermeneutical dimension as a matter of *adiaphora* in contrast to the authoritative regulative dimension.

5 What I am calling the regulative dimension corresponds to what the early Church called the rule of faith. It is not simply identical with the Bible. It is instead that which the Church has regarded as the central teachings of the Bible.

6 Origen, *On First Principles*, preface.

7 Vincent of Lerins, *A Commonitory, in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, series two (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 11:132

8 An exception occurs when, as the case of Thomas Aquinas shows, effort in the hermeneutical task may attain an exemplary status and become a classic, it can never, as the work of an individual, become truly authoritative, unless the community is willing to sanctify a particular and culturally conditioned understanding and declare it to be true.

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