

Chapter 1

The Creator and his Creation

In the first volume of this series, we dealt with the doctrine of God: the Lord, the Origin of all created things, who is Himself before all creation. There we were thinking of God as He is “in Himself”, of His Being “before” all time, “before” history, and “before” revelation; because unless this were so, unless God exists—from everlasting—“in Himself”, there would be no Creator, and no act of free creation. But we were only able to speak of Him who is “before all creation”, and “before all revelation”, on the basis of His revelation, not on the basis of any kind of philosophical speculation.

All that we have been saying about Him who is before all creation, and before all revelation, is based upon, and in accordance with the Scriptures. It is the divine revelation given to us in the Scriptures which constantly bears witness to the fact that God is “before all things”, “before the foundation of the world”.¹ At the same time we are aware of the fact that this word “before” does not denote “time”; for Time is itself the creation of God. Existence in Time is the way in which we—human beings—live, it is not the way in which God exists.

1. The Origin of Creation

God stands “above” the world, because He is the Lord, because it is only through His Word that it exists at all; but we are well aware that when we say this, “above” is not a spatial expression, since God alone creates Space. The supramundane nature of God, which is part of His Being, does not tell us anything about the relation between the Being of God and the spatial existence of the world. These two words, “before” and “above”, are both predicates of His Being as Lord. This is in direct opposition to the view of Greek philosophy and its later exponents, namely, that there is a correlation between God and the world, just as there is between left and right, i.e. that the one cannot be conceived apart from the other. We must drop this idea altogether, and try

1. Col. 1: 17; Eph. 1:4; 1 Pet. 1: 20; John 17: 24, etc..

to draw out the full meaning of the opposite conception. We are to think of God as the God who is “there”, apart from the world, who indeed Himself posits the world, to whom the world is not His *alter ego*: and when we think of the world we must think of it as something which does not naturally, essentially, and eternally, belong to God, but as something which only exists because it has been created by God. If it were otherwise, God would not be the *Lord* of the world at all, but, so to speak, its double.

We have said, it is true, that God, as He is in Himself, is the reason why there is a world at all. God’s being “-as-He-is-in-Himself” is at the same time the will to communicate Himself, His “being-for-us”, before we come into being. It is because He is “for us” that we have been created; it is because He wills to communicate Himself, that the world exists. Hence we have been thinking, not only of the eternal Being of God, but also of His eternal *Will*, which precedes all created being as the ground of its existence, of His “decree of creation”. It would be presumptuous to speak of this on the basis of our own thinking, how could a *man*—even the most gifted and far-sighted—be in a position to do this? But the Divine decree of Creation is the content of the divine self-revelation. “Things which eye saw not, and ear heard not, and which entered not into the heart of man, whatsoever things God prepared for them that love Him”.²

It is no accident that, when man is thrown back upon his own methods of acquiring knowledge, he knows nothing of such a “decree of creation”, the history of philosophy indeed—in so far as, consciously or unconsciously, it does not take the Biblical revelation into account—is silent on this point. But it is also no accident that the same original record of revelation which speaks of the divine plan of Salvation, also deals with the plan or decree of Creation; for how could God’s purpose for the world not be His plan which precedes it?³ How can the Lord of the world manifest His sovereignty without revealing to us that the world is grounded in His will, and, from the very beginning, has been ordered for this purpose? Not only the fact of the existence of the world, but all that is included in the fact of creation—the manner of creation and its purpose—is rooted in His Will as Creator, as that which precedes and establishes it.⁴ We would have failed to give the phrase “the created universe” its Biblical content, unless

2. 1 Cor. 2: 9 (R.V.). 3. John 1: 1-3; Col. 1: 16; 1 Cor. 8: 6. 4. Eph. 1: 11.

we had already dealt with the fact that the world is “rooted and grounded” in the nature of God, as Lord, and in His Will as Creator. In the following pages we now proceed to think out the meaning of this statement: that God, the Almighty Lord, is Creator, and that the world is His Creation. What does this mean?

2. The Knowledge of Creation

The theological statement: God is the “Creator of Heaven and Earth”, brings this affirmation into the sphere of facts which are accessible to our natural knowledge. No other “heaven” than that which we know, no other “earth” than that upon which we live, is meant by this credal statement. The article of belief in the Creation unites (in a way about which we shall have to think further later on) the world which we know with the mystery of God. This world which we know, which everyone knows more or less, is God’s creation. But while this article of belief in the Creation lights up the sphere of things with which we are familiar, what it says is not familiar. Of ourselves, we do not know that God is Creator, as we know the things of this world. This statement is not merely part of Natural Theology, in the sense of being a truth which a man can acquire for himself, but, like every other article of the Christian Creed, it is an article of faith; and that means, a statement based upon revelation.

When the words “Creator”, “Creation” and “creature” are used by Christian thinkers, they mean what the Creeds say, in spite of the fact that there are non-Christian or philosophical statements which sound very similar. The fact that there are philosophical or religious expressions in other religions which, at first sight, seem to say the same thing is, however (as we shall see in a moment), not accidental; but whatever that may mean, one thing is clear from the outset: in the Christian Creed the Creator means the God of the historical revelation, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Triune God; and by “Creation” it means that event which is founded in the revealed divine decree of Creation.

Indeed, we must not ignore the fact that we have just mentioned, namely, that non-Christian thinkers also speak of the “Creator” and the “Creation”. Yes, it is true that in almost all religions there *are* creation-myths of all kinds; there is the idea of a “Creator-Spirit” which, as it were, stands behind

and above the polytheistic or animistic pantheon of the gods; there are theistic doctrines of Creation in certain sects within Hinduism: above all, there is the doctrine of the Creator in Zoroastrianism and in Islam; there are hints of the Christian doctrine of Creation in the *Timaeus* of Plato, and in the writings of the great Stoics, Epictetus, Cicero, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius. These ideas exist, because God does not only reveal Himself through His Word in History, but also through His work in Creation, hence He leaves no man without a witness.⁵ And yet, in spite of all the analogies and apparent similarities, all these ideas and suggestions are different from the knowledge of God the Creator, as it is attested in His historical revelation, because sinful man is not capable of grasping what God shows him in His work in Creation without turning it into something else.⁶

Just as the “Lord God” of the Bible, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, is not the same as the *Theos* of Plato or Epictetus, the *Rama* of the Sikhs, or the *Ahura Mazda* of Zoroastrianism, so also His existence as Creator and his creation of the world are not the same. Here the saying, *si duo faciunt idem, non est idem*, is supremely and peculiarly apt.

Unfortunately the uniqueness of this Christian doctrine of Creation and the Creator is continually being obscured by the fact that theologians are so reluctant to begin their work with the New Testament; when they want to deal with the Creation they tend to begin with the Old Testament, although they never do this when they are speaking of the Redeemer. The emphasis on the story of Creation at the beginning of the Bible has constantly led theologians to forsake the rule which they would otherwise follow, namely, that the basis of *all* Christian articles of faith is the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ. So when we begin to study the subject of Creation in the Bible we ought to start with the first chapter of the Gospel of John, and some other passages of the *New Testament*, and not with the first chapter of Genesis. If we can make up our minds to stick to this rule, we shall be saved from many difficulties, which will inevitably occur if we begin with the story of Creation in the Old Testament.

Of course, I do not wish to deny the permanent significance of, and the absolute necessity for, the Old Testament account of the Creation—not only in the first two chapters of Genesis, but also in the Prophets, the Psalms, and in the Book of Job.

5. Acts 14: 17; Rom. 1: 19.

6. Rom. 1: 21.

In order to expand the somewhat scanty statements of the New Testament we certainly need the weighty and enriching testimony of the Old Testament; but in principle these statements are as introductory in character as the Old Testament witness to the Messiah is to that of the New Testament.

Even the most intelligent exposition of the Old Testament story of Creation which is offered as the basis of the Christian doctrine presents modern man with numerous difficulties, which cannot be removed by the most bold attempts at allegorizing the narrative.⁷ At this point, to fall back into a “Biblicism” which has already been abandoned in principle, will have a peculiarly disastrous effect. In principle our belief in the Creator is not bound up with the *narrative* of Creation in the Old Testament. The truth which the story of the creation of the world in six days contains is a powerful, and eternally impressive, expression of the preparatory self-revelation of God in the Old Testament; but it is no more the “canonical” form of the self-revelation of the Creator, than Isaiah 9 is the “canonical” form of the Old Testament witness to Christ.

3. Creation: Not a Theory of the Way in which the World came into Existence

This becomes clear directly we ask the question: Where is the meaning and the purpose of the divine Creation of the world shown to us most clearly? It is characteristic of the New Testament statements about the Creator and the Creation that here the fact of Creation and the manner of Creation are stressed far less than the reason why the world was created and to what end; while the narrative of the Creation in Genesis says nothing about this at all. It is true that a Christological exposition of this Old Testament narrative of Creation may, to some extent, fill the gap, but only at the cost of using arbitrary and forced methods of exegesis. But if we start from the decisive statements of the Fourth Gospel and the Epistles,⁸ the situation is immediately quite different.

Here certainly we are not given a narrative; there is no series of events; everything is gathered up and concentrated

7. In spite of the important truth of the exposition of the story of Creation by Karl Barth, *K.D.*, III, 1, it is a great pity that the great Basel theologian has presented his doctrine of Creation in the shape of an exposition of this passage of Old Testament Scripture.

8. John 1: 1–3; Col. 1: 15, 16; Heb. 1: 2.

at one decisive point: that God in, and through, the Logos, the Son, has created the world. If we keep *this* “record of Creation” before our eyes, then we do not need any lengthy system of argument to prove that it is totally different from all mythologies of creation, and also from all philosophical ideas of creation.

In the Prologue to the Gospel of John the Creation is mentioned in a way which we find nowhere else in the Bible; here it is clear that when a believer in Christ speaks of the Creation, he means something different from “explaining” why there is a world, or why things exist. In this witness to the Creation we are all addressed, and the meaning of our existence is defined. Here there is no question of confusing the Creation with a cosmogony. Here the Word which became flesh in Jesus Christ, and the Word of Creation, are one. In this Word of Creation the eternal decree, and in it also the purpose and the meaning of all existence become plain.⁹

To know the Creator thus, means to know, first and foremost, that God, because He is Sovereign Lord, is Creator. Thus from the outset this idea of Creation is clearly distinguished from all the various theories about the way in which the world came into existence. Before Israel knew Yahweh as *Creator*, it knew Him as *Lord*. Because He is absolute Lord He is Creator. It is not forbidden, and indeed it is inevitable, that, as human beings, on the basis of our knowledge of the world, we must ask questions about its origin, and certainly it is not unimportant that to-day leading physicists once more point to a divine reason as the basis of the world which they discover through science. But this has a very remote and indirect relation to the Christian doctrine of Creation. The Christian belief in Creation arises at the point where all Christian faith arises, namely, in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. For there God meets us as the Lord, who, because He is Lord, is the Creator. Even faith in God the Creator is “truth-as-encounter”; the Lord who meets me in His Word, in His Word as Person—Jesus Christ, is LORD, absolutely; thus He who is “above” all and “before” all is the One who originates all things and is Himself originated by none; He is the One who determines all things and is determined by none. Even this truth is expressed in the form: “I, *thy* God and Creator”, and not “HE, the World-Creator”. This truth comes to man as a personal summons; it is not a truth which is the fruit of reflection; hence it is

9. 1 Cor. 8: 6.

truth which, from the very outset, makes me directly responsible. “I am the Lord thy God”, the Creator; this means: “Thou art My property”. This does not mean that I start from the idea that God is the Creator of the world, and then argue that since I also form part of the world I also recognize Him as my Creator, and then come to the conclusion that I belong to God. The way to the knowledge of faith is the very opposite: here, as everywhere in the Christian Faith, the “I-Thou” comes first; hence from the outset, and not later on, this truth has ethical force. For the fact that man belongs to God implies the whole truth of responsibility and of all moral obligation. In Jesus Christ we meet Him who addresses us as absolute Lord, and therefore as the Creator of all things: “I, thy Lord, the Creator.”

This does not mean, however, that the truth of *my* creation precedes the truth that the *world* has been created. My Lord—that is, the Creator, absolutely, not only the Creator of my existence. Since in Jesus Christ I meet my Lord, I meet Him who is the Lord of the whole world. Since He reveals Himself as “my” Lord, He reveals Himself as the One who determines all things, and is determined by none. Schleiermacher’s phrase “absolute dependence” is right, indeed it is excellent; only the way in which he expounds it is wrong. Here too we must admit that Schleiermacher was right in making a very clear distinction between the knowledge of this absolute dependence and any theory of a cosmogony.¹⁰ If only he had taken this truth of “absolute dependence” seriously! But he could not do so, because his faith was not based on this personal encounter, because his faith was not based on the Word which addresses man personally. That is why this idea of “absolute dependence” is confused with the causality which runs through Nature,¹¹ with which it has nothing at all to do. For the idea of Creation means that I, together with the whole of Nature to which I belong, am absolutely dependent upon God, while He, on the other hand, is dependent neither upon me nor upon it.

4. Creation *Ex Nihilo*

The truth that God is the One who determines all things and is determined by none, is the precise meaning of the idea of Creation as *creatio ex nihilo*, Creation “out of nothing” does

10. *Glaubenslehre*, 36, 2.

11. *Ibid.*, 46.

not mean, however,—as Gnosticism of all ages continually interprets it—that there was once a “Nothing” out of which God created the world, a negative primal beginning, a Platonic *ME ON*, a formlessness, a chaos, a primal Darkness. The “ex” of the *creatio ex nihilo* does not suggest any kind of “matter”—however vague and shadowy—but it means the fact that God alone brought the world into being. There never was a “nothing” alongside of God, as it were, but God alone. The Gnostic doctrine of “Nothing” is the final attempt to adapt the certainly incomprehensible mystery of Creation to that which we know from experience as a semi-creation, the formation of something; it understands the Creation as the moulding of a formless original substance.

This idea of Creation, as the shaping of formless matter, is the content of all creation *myths*, and we can even trace its influence on the Old Testament story of Creation. But the New Testament idea of Creation absolutely excludes any idea that any other force, save God, had any share in Creation. The idea of Creation expresses the truth that God assumes complete and sole responsibility for the existence of the world, and moreover it does not excuse the fact that it is finite, by suggesting the existence of a “nothing”, an uncreated ὕλη, a *MÊ ON*, which—”unfortunately”—also played an anonymous part in the process, and is the reason for the imperfection of the world.

God is the One who absolutely determines all things, and is determined by none. He is conditioned by nothing, therefore, not even by a “Nothing”. Were He to be thus conditioned He would not be Creator, but simply a demiurge. All that existed “before” all creation was God and His Word. The Creation has its foundation and its origin in God alone. “For He spake and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast”.¹² “In the beginning was the Word ... all things were made by Him”. This too is the meaning of the sublime story of Creation in the first chapter in the Bible! “God spake ... and it was done.” This magnificent presentation of the *creatio ex nihilo*, or—and it is the same thing—creation “by the Word”, is still faintly coloured by a relic of the mythical idea of an original Chaos, an idea which in other passages in the Old Testament betrays still more clearly its polytheistic-mythical origin.¹³

To try to explain it away leads to an arbitrary process of allegorization, or (and from the theological point of view this

12. Ps. 33: 9.

13. Ps. 74: 13, 14; 104: 6 fl..