STUDYING THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION:

The Challenge

*By H. Paul Santmire**

What have students of theology learned about the doctrine of creation in the last few decades? Probably not too much.

The index of a standard text such as J. N. D. Kelly's *Early Christian Doctrines* (1959) tells a striking story. Apparently there was no early Christian doctrine of creation! The absence of such an entry obviously tells much more about the study of theology in our era than it does about early Christian thought.

In recent decades the theology of creation has been regularly touched on in discussions of "theology and science." But that has been mainly in the context of fundamental theology, that is, within the province of methodology and epistemology (what used to be called "Dogmatics I"). Participants in that discussion usually have sought to set limits for both science and theology, or to identify certain complementary or paradigmatically similar modes of knowing in the particular noetic communities in which the natural sciences and theology are respectively rooted. They have not, as a general rule, sought to develop a constructive theology of creation as such.

The "creationism-evolution" debate, moreover, which has lately reemerged like a specter from the deep, which most of us thought had died a well-deserved death a hundred years ago, is also not really about the doctrine of creation. It also falls under the rubric of Dogmatics I, in this case the doctrine of the inspiration of the Scriptures.

The theology of creation has surely drawn the attention of some biblical scholars, in Old Testament studies, most notably perhaps Gerhard von Rad. But the result of this interest has mainly been to show that the Bible has no "independent" theology of creation, that creation is indeed subordinate to human redemption in biblical thought, and that the history of human salvation *(Heilsgeschichte)* is the most important hermeneutical category for interpreting biblical fatih, not the history of creation.

Also in the field of New Testament studies, notwithstanding some relatively isolated countertrends, the accent on *Heilsgeschichte* has been dominant. With Bultmann, moreover, and with many of his disciples, the general accent on the hermeneutical significance of human soteriology has been further narrowed, to the particular point of the individual believer's subjectivity as he or she is addressed by the *kerygma* and thereby offered a new self-understanding. Significantly, Bultmann himself shared much of Adolf von Harnack's empathy for Marcion. Why not jettison the Old Testament, with its "cosmic" and "objectifying" concerns about the whole creation? What good are those concerns in this modern day, after all? Such

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questions hover visibly at the edge of Bultmann's hermeneutical enterprise, if they do not exactly dominate at the center. And they often appear to be presupposed in the exegetical and constructive works of Bultmann's students —the most notable exception being Kašemann — sometimes, it seems, more unconsciously than consciously.

One huge exception to this general trend of a thoroughgoing theological distancing from the doctrine of creation in its own right seems to be Karl Barth's massive treatment of the doctrine in his *Church Dogmatics.* Barth, perhaps ironically, gave more space to this doctrine than to any other single doctrine, more than 2000 pages! Yet one can wonder who reads the *Church Dogmatics* carefully these days, or who ever did, given that work's monumental size and ponderous style, not to mention other possibly disquieting factors. But such considerations aside, one can raise the substantive questions whether a reading of those more than 2000 pages will produce a theological gain, as far as the study of creation theology is concerned. It sounds presumptuous to say this so baldly, but it can be demonstrated: Barth produces a theology of creation which is hardly against the stream of modern theology, but which in fact is formally and often materially well within the theological mainstream.

Barth coins the term "the-anthropology" to describe his mature dogmatic thought. Theology for him is not an abstract doctrine or a speculative construct, a the-ology, but precisely the concrete narrative of God's gracious covenant with humanity in Jesus Christ, a the-anthropology in this particular sense. Accordingly he depicts creation as the external ground of the covenant; creation is thus totally subordinated to human redemption. We can say, therefore, that creation is "hominized" in Barth's thought. It is subsumed under the categories of what Barth also refers to as "the humanity of God." Accordingly, Barth argues that there can be no such thing as a theology of nature, in the sense of the material-vital aspect of creation, only a theology of the human. His 2000-plus pages on creation thus turn out to be, when all has been said and done, a celebration of God's history with humanity, together with a lengthy side glance at the other creatures in the universe and a vision of them as a kind of stage posited by God to enable his covenantal history with humanity. Emil Brunner and many other theologians in the last four decades take more or less the same position. One might think of Barth's doctrine of creation, then, as the most complete expression of the conventional theological wisdom about creation in our time. It meshes neatly, moreover, with the aforementioned near-consensus in biblical studies, wherein creation is regularly depicted as the framework or the presupposition for the history of human salvation, either universally (von Rad) or individualistically (Bultmann).

If Barth is not an exception to the eclipse of creation in modern theology, Paul Tillich definitely is. He presents a rich doctrine of God's creativity, which he sees displayed throughout the whole creation, not merely focused on the milieu of human history or human subjectivity. Tillich also has a profound sense for the immanence of the creative Ground of Being, God, "in, with, and under" the world of nature in particular, as his essay "Nature and Sacrament" shows. In this sense his theology is ecological and theocentric, as well as historical and anthropocentric. Yet contemporary students of theology may well encounter other difficulties in Tillich's thought which may make his theology of creation less available or perhaps not a viable option at all Thus Tillich self-consciously goes beyond what he calls "biblical personalism." As a result, as Carl Braaten has argued, ontological rather than historical categories finally seem to dominate his thought, which makes his theology relatively inaccessible to those students who wish to think primarily in terms of the personal and historical categories of biblical faith.

II.

There were understandable reasons, both extra- and inner-theological reasons, for this general theological eclipse of creation in the modern period, at least within the tradition of those who fully accepted the parameters of biblical personalism and the primacy of historical categories, as Tillich apparently did not.

We can think first of the influence of Immanuel Kant, who was to become a towering figure for much of modern Protestant theology. Through his relentless paring, the traditional theology of creation—which envisioned a beautiful cosmic hierarchy of being that everywhere was charged with intimations or traces of the Creator —was whittled away. Kant took the mechanical view of nature, bequeathed to him by Newton, for granted. According to that view, nature is a closed and lifeless system of intrinsically purposeless mass and motion. In the same vein, Kant held that the idea of God is always transcendent, which means that it can have no immanent employment in reference to objects of our experience. Nature, then, remained

for Kant a self-subsisting whole, like a machine indeed, the sum of "appearances" insofar as they stand, in virtue of an inner principle of causality, in thoroughgoing interconnection. Thus in Kant's schema God and nature were radically separated. We witness the same development in Kant's anthropology. He viewed the human body, as part of nature, exclusively in mechanical terms. Human subjectivity, on the other hand, he depicted as totally nature-transcending, knowable not by theoretical reason, but only in terms of moral experience.

Kant did assign a certain teleology to the whole creation. Reasoning on the basis of moral experience, he suggested that it is not contradictory to hold that the whole universe is posited by God in order to allow God to bring into being as the final end (te/os) of all things, a kingdom of rational spirits. But more than positing this anthropocentric teleology of creation Kant would not do. Post-Kantian Protestant theology would therefore find it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to speak of a primal creative beginning of all things (protology) or a final universal ending of all things (eschatology), and even more difficult to speak of God as the universal creative power in, with, and under the whole universe, except for the realm of human moral or spiritual experience. The New Testament image of Jesus Christ as the Head of all creation would be still more inaccessible. The theologians who were most deeply immersed in Kantian thinking, such as Albrecht Ritschl and Rudolf Bultmann, would be unable to think of anything positive to do with that biblical theme.

Further, the much heralded "warfare between science and religion" in the late nineteenth century left many theologians with a bad taste in their mouths, not to say burdened with intellectual guilt, as far as the theology of creation was concerned. (Will this reaction repeat itself in our day?) Was not theology's attempt to say anything about creation, especially the extra-human creation, finally discredited by the post-Darwinian debacle? In retrospect, many students of theology concluded that the evolutionists had fundamentally won the debate with the creationists (as they will undoubtedly win it again a hundred years later). And that made many students of theology reluctant to say anything about nature at all!

Henceforth, the human creature alone, and indeed the human creature in its "spiritual" aspects, would come to be the chief object of theological attention as students of theology thought about the created world. Harnack expressed the feeling of more than one generation of theological students when he defined theology in such a way that the extra-human realm of creation, and indeed the human body itself, was abandoned as a subject of theological interest and left by default to the natural sciences: for Harnack the content of theology is "God the Father and the human soul so ennobled that it can and does unite with him."

In addition to Kantian influence and post-Darwinian developments, the rise of National Socialism in Germany had an immense impact on the minds of many students of theology in the twentieth century. The Nazis touted their "Thousand Year Reich" in the name of a new religion of nature, featuring "Nordic" rites of primitivism and violence. And the notorious "German Christians" climbed on that ideological bandwagon by espousing, of all things, a new theology of creation. They celebrated the Creator's great acts in universal history, and, in the tradition of Hegel, rested their case with the notion that the German nation was the most recent and greatest act of God. However-much, therefore, one might wish to criticize Bultmann for the denaturalizing and individualizing results of his program of demythologizing, or Barth for his radical subordination of creation to human redemption in Christ, one has to recognize the utterly urgent and unavoidable socio-political context in which both these theologians wrote. To lift up faith in Jesus Christ alone was for them a way of pronouncing judgment on the ways of Moloch, who had reappeared in their time under the relatively benign guise of an "independent" theology of creation. Much of the now often misunderstood passion of Barth's famous "No" to Emil Brunner, for example, concerning the question of the validity of a "natural theology" in any form, is rooted in the spirit of the Barmen Declaration, and is therefore to be read as a radical protest against any kind of cultural accommodation in theology. That the theology of creation still hangs under the cloud called forth by the so-called German Christians seems apparent, even though that thought is not always articulated in public discussions of the topic.

Behind all these extra-theological factors, deeper inner theological trends were also at work, which tended to push the theology of creation to the periphery of the modern Christian mind, trends which antedated Kant, the Darwinian controversy, and the rise of German Christian Theology. Since the time of Augustine, if not from the very beginning of post-biblical theological reflection in the West, soteriological issues had been of prime concern to the church. The theological tradition had rejected Gnosticism and Marcion, and to that degree had affirmed a theology of creation; but must theologians very soon became preoccupied with issues more directly related to soteriology, especially trinitarian and christological themes. By

the time of the Reformation, dogmatic developments in trinitarian and christological reflection had brought the Western tradition to a certain consensus about these central doctrines, and that left soteriology as the chief arena for theological contention.

For Luther, accordingly, everything stands or falls with the doctrine of justification by faith through grace alone, that is, through Christ alone. Justification, he says, is "the master and prince, the lord, the ruler, and judge over all kinds of doctrines." This soteriological emphasis in Reformation thought was by definition, to use Barth's term, the-anthropological. It focused on God and humanity. This was also reflected in the dynamics of Luther's epistemology. He frequently counseled his hearers to turn away from "speculation" on the visible works of God throughout the whole creation to the invisible revelation of the Creator in the Cross of Christ.

Luther surely developed a rich theology of the whole creation, with deep exegetical underpinnings in biblical thought. But the doctrine of justification undeniably stood at the center of his theology. Then the philosophy of Kant, two centuries later, functioned as a kind of "ktisiological sieve," if that expression be permitted: when Reformation thought filtered through the Kantian critique, Luther's rich theology of creation was left behind, and the the-anthropological center of his thought, the accent of God's gracious redemption of humanity, was left more or less intact.

It should now be apparent how those aforementioned extra-theological factors—Kantiansim, the debate about Darwinism, and the rejection of the German Christian Theology —could coalesce harmoniously with the just-mentioned inner-theological dynamics, the increasingly the-anthropocentric focus on soteriology in the West. There were good external reasons, in other words, not to focus theological attention on the whole creation, and good internal reasons to focus theological attention chiefly on God and humanity, not on God and the whole creation. Together these extra- and inner-factors helped to build a kind of wall around the field of theological reflection in modern Protestant theology, protecting it or —depending on one's point of view —restricting it. The theology of creation in its own right was more or less judged off limits. Sometimes it was out-of-sight and out-of-mind.

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floods, acid rain, etc.) often in direct relation to human abuse and exploitation. This growing alienation from nature is also related to the sense of isolation and vulnerability which many are beginning to feel as the species probes the vast threatening emptiness of "outer space." The alienation is encouraged also by the chilling thoughts of those who extrapolate existentially from the second law of thermodynamics and conclude that the whole universe is going nowhere, that all things are destined for a final, ignominious "heat death." This existential aspect of the human crisis in ecology, like the environmental aspect, will not magically disappear, howevermuch people may choose to minimize it or neglect it. It is in the spiritual bloodstream of the human species today.

Both the existential and the environmental aspects of the human crisis in ecology must therefore be confronted. Students of theology will have to learn how to espouse a theology that claims the whole creation, positively and fully, for God —a holistic, hopeful theology of all things, ta *panta*— and not merely rest content with a now evidently inadequate theology of God and humanity alone, wherein the extra-human universe appears as a kind of divine afterthought and as a field of exploitation given over to human mastery.

The cries of the whole creation, thankfully, have not gone unheard by contemporary theologians. Two decades ago the situation was eloquently addressed by Joseph Sittier. In his prophetic speech to the World Council of Churches at New Delhi, he called for a "cosmic christology," for a soteriology that moves within the whole and manifold vastness and diversity of the created order. Sittier discerned the trends of these times, both ecologically and theologically, with a kind of seismographic perspicacity. In ensuing writings, accordingly, particularly his *Essays on Nature and Grace* (1971), he called the church and its theologians to move beyond what he believed to be their outdated the-anthropocentric soteriology and their anthropocentric theology of creation. Could students of theology, then, one day come to think and see the "inscape" of the whole creation, charged with the glory of God, as G. M. Hopkins and, following him, Sittier also depicted it?

Given the aforementioned extra-theological and inner-theological factors that have so long held the wall around theology so firmly, the inner-theological challenge that Sittier presents to Western theology must be perceived as both radical and revolutionary. His challenge is in fact a call for a kind of paradigm shift in Christian thought, away from an exclusively the-anthropological soteriology, to what can be called an inclusive or a universal soteriology, which envisions the final salvation of all things as the *telos* of creation, not just the salvation of a kingdom of rational spirits, in the fashion of most post-Kantian Protestant theology.

Sittier surely does not stand alone in this respect. Other inner theological trends that move in the same direction are also in evidence today. One can instance the thought of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and its widespread influence. His universalizing christic vision of reality remains within the parameters of biblical personalism, in contrast to Tillich; yet at the same time it gives a place to God, in, with, and under the whole creation and presupposes a substantive theology of nature. It also seems to be permeated with serious ambiguities: Does ontology, not history, finally have the last word in Teilhard's thought, as in Tillich's? And does not his idea of the spiritualization and unification of matter finally signal the triumph of a traditional the-anthropocentric theology? In the same vein, one can think of the growing influence of "process" thought, flowing from the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead. This angle of vision opens up a panorama of universal organic evolution and attests a unified relationship between God, humanity, and the whole cosmos. Whether this mode of thought can finally be integrated successfully with the biblical categories of history and eschatology, however, and whether it can allow for sufficient attention to the special qualities and requirements of human history in particular, such as the need for revolution at times, rather than mere evolution, remains to be seen.

In this connection one can also think of the heightened interest on the part of some biblical scholars in New Testament eschatology and apocalyptic, which may open the way for a more sympathetic reading of the biblical expectation of a "new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" than has been forthcoming from many biblical scholars in our century. In the same vein, one can call to mind Jurgen Moltmann's elevation of hope to the center of his theology, as the chief doctrine, akin to the role faith occupied in Luther's theology. Here theology again moves in the universal context of ta *panta,* as it did in Paul's thought and in the thought world of early Christian writers such as Irenaeus. With Moltmann, too, we witness, as for Paul and Irenaeus, an eschatological rather than a protological dynamic that shapes his thought about creation. Wolfhardt Pannenberg's "universal history," although championed at times over Moltmann's allegedly less systematic, allegedly less rigorous writings, turns out to be, on closer analysis, not so universal after all. It is radically the-anthropocentric, notwithstanding the single essay he has devoted to the theology of nature. In

this respect, Pannenberg stands in the "hominizing" tradition of Barth and Hegel, bound by the canons of German idealism, as Moltmann is not.

What is the future of the study of the doctrine of creation in this situation? On the one hand, theology students will be well advised to learn from the past, to think critically with regard to the theology of creation. We cannot simply expect to return to Luther's theology of creation, for example, or to the intuitions of a St. Francis, as if Kantianism, the debate about Darwinism, the challenge represented by the German Christians, and the whole inner theological emphasis in the West on a the-anthropocentric soteriology did not exist. The theological reconstruction that the times seem to be calling for, as far as the doctrine of creations is concerned, cannot be developed romantically. It must be post-critical, not pre-critical.

On the other hand, we cannot rest content with what now can be diagnosed as a bad case of hardening of the categories, from which the received tradition is suffering, as far thought about creation is concerned. Theology students today must be willing to explore the possibility of a new ecological hermeneutic of history, if they are ever to begin to discern the fulness of the biblical witness to God's gracious purposes, as adumbrated in texts such as Genesis 1, Psalm 104, Romans 11:36, Colossians 1:15ff., and II Peter 3:13. They must also be willing to experiment with what can be called ecological thinking, a mode of thought that may be, in significant ways, post-Protestant—in the sense that it accents Catholic substance, as well as Protestant principle, universality as well as particularity, both/and as well as either/or, imaginative coherence as well as existential paradox. Ecological thinking in theology allows us to depict "everthing related to everything else," to see every creature in its uniqueness before God, yet all creatures in their interdependence with God. Ecological thinking is holistic. It encourages us to see God in, with, and under the whole creation, not just within the parameters of *Heilsgeschichte* or believing subjectivity; to value the history of nature as well as human history; to envision humanity as living united with nature and working cooperatively with nature, as well as transcending nature, to depict a world of nature that has its own rights, given by Cod, as part of a hierarchy of rights culminating in human rights; to think of Jesus Christ as the head of the whole creation, not merely the Church; and finally to allow for the hope of a final consummation of all things as well as the particular salvation of humanity, to reaffirm the Pauline vision of the Son, at the very End, transferring the Kingdom to the Creator, so that God might finally be all in all.

What will students of theology learn about the doctrine of creation in the next several decades? Hopefully they will learn to think critically about creation, as students in preceding generations were taught to think. But still more hopefully, they may learn how to think ecologically about creation. That is the challenge now before us.