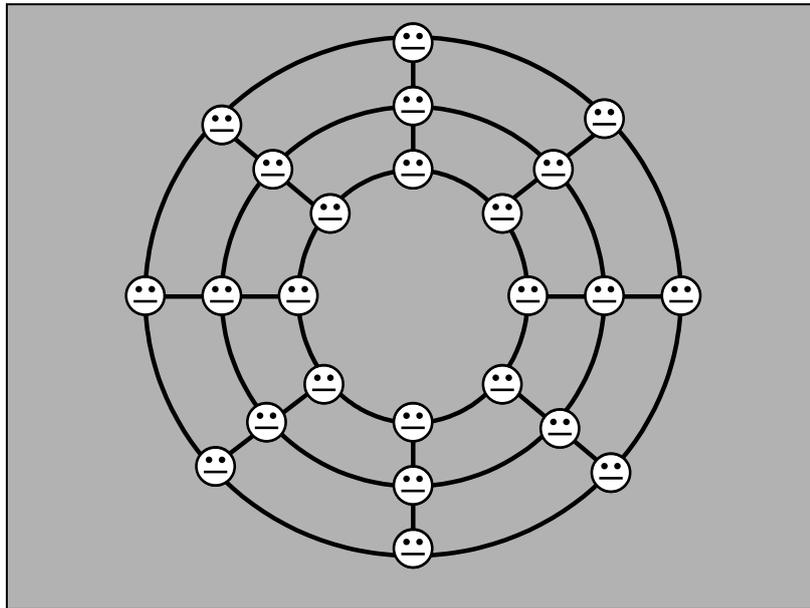


God is a Community

Part 2: The Meaning of Life



This week we will attempt to answer just two simple questions:

How did God create? and Why did God create?

Although faith is much more concerned with the second question, we will see that the answer the Bible gives to the “How” of creation plays an important role in helping us understand the “Why”. It is also the “How” that has caused the most controversy between Theology and Science over the years.

Biblical ideas about Creation:

Creation as Victory over Chaos

The dominating worldview concerning creation in the Ancient Near East was that a good god had conquered an evil god of chaos and so brought order to the cosmos, thus creating the world as we know it. Strands of this thought are also present in the Bible in such passages as Genesis 1:2, which depicts the world being “formless and void” at the time of the creation, and Psalm 74:13-15 where God conquers Leviathan, the great monster of the deep.

For reasons that will become evident this theme was not developed in the Bible and “chaos” came to mean much the same as “nothingness”.

Creation by Shaping

The second creation narrative (Genesis 2) pictures God shaping Adam out of dust, and the great creation poem in Psalm 104 also uses shaping imagery to describe the creative process. The particular Hebrew word (*bara*) used for God’s act of creation, however, implies a process that is not dependent on any pre-existent material.

Creation by Word

The idea about creation that came to dominate Biblical thought was that God had created simply by saying, “Let there be...”. Unlike in other ancient traditions though, the creative Word in the Bible was not a magical incantation but was powerful to create simply because it is God’s Word. So here we have

the basis of what later theology called *creatio ex nihilo* – creation out of nothing – which is one of the foundational Christian beliefs about creation. In the New Testament Jesus Christ Himself becomes identified as God’s creative Word. Creation is brought about through and for Christ and has its goal in Christ (John 1:1-14, Colossians 1:16, 1 Corinthians 8:6).

Creation as a Continuous Action

Another foundational Christian belief about creation is that God not only sets things in motion at the start of creation, but also then continues to sustain the creation moment by moment. We see this for example in Psalm 104:27-30

²⁷ These all look to you to give them their food in due season;

²⁸ when you give to them, they gather it up;

when you open your hand, they are filled with good things.

²⁹ When you hide your face, they are dismayed;

when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.

³⁰ When you send forth your spirit, they are created;

and you renew the face of the ground.

God’s re-creative power comes out particularly clearly in the New Testament ideas about the end times, which are not depicted as an end of creation but as a “new creation”, a “Resurrection”, a “new heaven and a new earth”.

Creation and Salvation

While all these images of creation exist in the Bible, it is important to note that the Bible never speaks about God’s act of creation apart from God’s purpose in creation. In particular, the Bible appeals to God’s power as Creator as the ultimate source of our confidence in God as Saviour – God is powerful to save God’s creatures because God is the One who created them in the first place. See for example Isaiah 44:24ff, and Isaiah 51.

Creatio ex nihilo

Christians believe that God created everything out of nothing. But what does this actually mean? More specifically, what is “nothing”?

Most people think of nothingness as a vast, dark, empty space into which God calls things into being. But an empty space is not nothing, it is a space. Similarly, most people think of there being a point in time when God created. But again a point in time is not nothing, it is something. So, in short, both space and time began with creation and both came into being out of nothing. What is being stressed here is creation’s total dependence on God for its existence and, although it might seem like quite an abstraction to think about such things, the implications of *creatio ex nihilo* are very important for maintaining a Biblical perspective on creation, especially in the light of scientific discoveries and theories about the origins of the universe.

A good example of this point is the recent advances made by theoretical physicists such as Stephen Hawking into understanding the dynamics of the original few moments of creation (often referred to as the Big Bang). As scientific theory regarding the origins of matter and the origins of species developed in the 19th and 20th centuries, it became vogue for Christians to take the position that God’s creative action lay in the “gaps” that could not be explained by science (yet). So for example, God created by jumping the “gaps” between energy and matter, between simple atoms and complex molecules, between apes and humans, and so on. The obvious weakness of this approach was that it was just a matter of time before science was able to produce theories to close the “gaps”, and in fact Stephen Hawking does a fine job in cataloguing just this progression in science, until he reaches the conclusion that there is now no longer any need at all for a God in scientific theory.

Yet the problem with this entire line of thought is that it misunderstands (or misuses) the concept of “nothing”. Creation out of nothing, as understood by Christianity, means that *by definition* there is nothing outside of God from which God called things into being. Whatever scientists want to use as their starting point (potential energy prior to the Big Bang, for example) was simply called into existence by God. Perhaps one way to express this truth is to think of creation existing as a “gap” within God (a space within God from which God withdraws in order to make space for creation) rather than to think of God existing in the “gaps” of creation.

Continuous Creation

Christians also believe that God sustains creation moment by moment. The theological point here is to emphasize God’s ongoing care and concern for the creation. But again it has important implications for our dialogue with science, because following the Enlightenment a view of the creation, known as deism, emerged according to which the role of God was reduced to that of a Divine Watchmaker: one who “wound creation up” as it were with all sorts of physical laws, set it in motion, and then just sat back and watched it tick away on its own.

Christianity believes that God is personally and immediately involved in the creation moment by moment.¹

Faith Implications

If God created the world out of nothing and sustains it moment by moment, then there are certain implications for the nature of the world.

- 1) **All creation is inherently good:** God is good and what God creates is good. God even said so during the act of creation (Genesis 1). Given the history of Christian thought in this regard, it must be pointed out that even physical drives including sexuality are inherently good. Time and again the heresy has emerged within the Church which placed matter as an evil principle against spirit as a pure or good principle. Now while it is true that physical drives can be devastating when perverted, that does not mean that they are *inherently* evil.
- 2) **There is no dualism in creation:** If God created everything out of nothing, then there is no other god or counter-force that opposes God. Even evil itself is not independent of God. Evil’s personification, the Devil, does not exist as an eternal opposite to God but merely as one of God’s good creatures (an angel of light? 2 Cor 11:14) who chose to serve himself rather than his Creator.
- 3) **There is no pantheism:** Pantheism is the idea that everything is part of God’s very substance. But if God created out of nothing then creation is radically different to God or, to put it the other way around, then God is utterly transcendent to the creation.
- 4) **Everything is a miracle:** If God created everything out of nothing, then the mere existence of anything is a miracle (if by miracle we mean God’s divine intervention in the created order). Moreover, God’s ongoing sustaining of the creation is also a miracle. What we normally call “miracles” are also divine interventions by God – they are just unusual or surprising interventions.

¹ Some very exciting theories in physics over the past century have given us new ways to understand the relationship between God and the creation, and particular these two principles of *creatio ex nihilo* and continuous creation. This is not the place for scientific theorizing, but the interested reader is referred to the writings of Christian mystic Teilhard de Chardin, and quantum theorist, David Bohm.

- 5) **Creation is dependable:** If God sustains the whole of creation moment by moment, then creation is dependable. This is so we believe, not simply because in our experience empirical tests usually produce the same results, but more fundamentally because God is faithful (refer to what we said last week about God's immutability).
- 6) **Creation has a purpose:** If we believe that God is personally involved in creation, both in its origin and its ongoing existence, then we must also believe that creation has a purpose from God's perspective. Although this must be true for the entire cosmos, Christianity has normally focused its thinking about the purpose of the creation around the purpose of the creation of humanity.

Humanity as the Crown of God's Creation

The Bible often speaks about humanity as the highest point or crown of God's creation. This point is made in different ways by both creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 and in many other places such as Psalm 8:4-6,

“what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet”

What it is about human beings that gives them this exalted status among all God's creatures is explained in the Bible by saying that humans are created in the image of God. We will unpack the theological implications of this statement shortly, but for now I only wish to note that, quite apart from any Biblical statement, it is true that humans do possess a certain quality that distinguishes them from any other creatures (that we know of). I am referring to the fact that humans are self-conscious. We have reflexive consciousness, i.e. we are conscious of ourselves as conscious beings. To the best of our knowledge this is the highest form of consciousness there is among created beings. We are conscious of our own mortality, we are conscious of a higher being, and we are able to reason and to contemplate meaning. This consciousness also enables us to relate more freely and in more complex relationships than any other creatures we know of.

There is much debate amongst scholars as to how exactly such highly complex consciousness came about², but Christians all agree that it was God's intention to create such beings in order for God to relate to them in loving relationships.

Before moving to a discussion of humanity's relationship with God, though, I must say a word about our relationship with the rest of creation because being the pinnacle of the creation has too often been misinterpreted to mean that humanity has *carte blanche* to treat the rest of creation as it chooses. The scriptures make it very clear that our position in creation places a fiduciary responsibility upon us to care for creation (Genesis 1:28-30, 2:15). This is a point well worth contemplating more deeply in the light of the present ecological crises facing the globe.

² The various views can be summarized as follows: Firstly, creationists hold that God simply made humans so on the 6th day of creation; secondly, less literalist Christians (and others) hold to the strong anthropic principle, namely that all the laws of physics were designed to ensure that human life would emerge; thirdly there are those who hold the weak anthropic principle, namely that the laws of physics just so happen to favour the development of human beings and that it might just as easily never have happened.

Human Beings as the Image of God

What exactly is it about human beings that reflects the “image” of God? Most of the answers given to this question assume that it is the individual human being who reflects the image of God. And indeed, on that score there is much that can be said. Genesis 1 & 2 show us that humans, like God, are creative. They are able to shape the world around them, to take control of it, and to work creatively in it. Furthermore, humans are also capable of free and intimate personal relationships. Like God we are able to love and be loved. The fact that our ability to relate lovingly is a free ability, can be seen in the fact that we often choose not to relate lovingly.

So creativity, freedom and our ability to relate personally are all ways in which we bear the image of God.

It should also be noted that these are qualities which every human being shares. From a faith perspective, therefore, we cannot justify any form of discrimination or hierarchy between people according to gender, race, age, ability/disability, intelligence, etc. for all are equally created in the image of God.

Human Community as the Image of God

Returning to our discussion last week about taking the Trinity seriously, we should also consider how humanity collectively reflects the image of God. For God is not an individual in the same way that you or I are, but a Divine Community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. As such, it is not only the individual human being who is the image of God, but we can also say that precisely because we have been created for community (Genesis 2:18) and in fact are a community, we also collectively reflect the image of God. Of course this does not mean that we reflect the Divine Community perfectly (or even very well), for our relationships are not as perfectly loving as those within the Trinity. Nevertheless, the mere fact that we have been created with the *potential* to relate lovingly to one another and to God, means that we bear some image of God.

If we push this idea a little bit further, we also uncover some of the deeper meaning of being human. For if we are created in the image of God and if, as we said last week, the thing that makes God God is God’s relationality (in particular God’s ceaseless loving relationality), then so too humanity is incapable of being truly human except by being in loving community. This idea comes remarkably close to the African saying “Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” (a person is a person only through other persons).

The Meaning of Life (or, What on earth are you doing for Heaven’s sake?)

What is the purpose of creation? The traditional answer has been: for the glory of God. But what is God’s “glory”? If God is love, then God’s glory is the glory of love. So to say that creation had been made for God’s glory is to say that it has been made for God’s love. And here of course, humanity again has a particular role to play in creation, because unlike the rest of creation, humanity is in the unique position that it can not only be loved *by* God, but that it can also love *like* God. So we have Biblical passages such as John 17:21-23 in which Jesus prays that we may be one (united in love) even as God the Father and God the Son are one (united in love). The same point is being made in Romans 11:36 and Colossians 1:16 where humanity is described as having been made “for God” and “for Christ”. We are made “for” relationship with the persons of the Trinity.

In practical terms this creation for love is not limited to our relationship with God, nor is it a purpose that will only be fulfilled in the next life. Instead it encompasses at least the following fourfold set of relationships:

- 1) Love of God – The Westminster Shorter Catechism has the following question and answer: What is the chief end of man? To glorify God and enjoy Him forever. As we have already seen, such glory and enjoyment is nothing other than a loving relationship with God. I would even go further and say that such a relationship is in fact a participation in the internal Divine Love-Life of the Trinity.
- 2) Love of Self – Perhaps a better way to describe a relationship with oneself is to speak of inner peace, or even humility. By this is simply meant the self-knowledge and self-acceptance that makes for a whole individual capable of loving and being loved.
- 3) Love of Others – 1 John 4:20 makes it clear that love for God is tantamount to love for others. We are created for loving relationships and as a community we only reflect the image of God properly when such loving relationships exist between us.
- 4) Love of Creation – As we have seen, as bearers of the image of God, we have a particular role to play in creation, namely to love and care for creation as God loves and cares for creation.