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Creation Within the Love of God

Author(s): V. Bruce Rigdon

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V. Bruce Rigdon

Dr. Rigdon is Professor of Church History at McCormick Theological Seminary.

Creation Within the Love of God

1967: THAT WAS THE YEAR THAT WAS. Do you remember? It was a year which saw 700,000 Americans march down Fifth Avenue in support of U.S. soldiers fighting in Vietnam, while some months later 50,000 citizens assembled at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to protest our nation's involvement in that conflict. It was a year which witnessed the Six Day War between Israel and the Arab states, and the burning of American cities in the midst of racial strife. It was a year in which the Shah of Iran crowned himself and his wife, the Empress Farah, amidst lavish celebrations in Tehran, while King Constantine and his family fled to Rome after failing to overthrow the military junta in Greece. It was a year in which Pope Paul VI made a peace pilgrimage to Istanbul and Charles De Gaulle made his famous 'Quebec libre' speech during a state visit to Canada. American movie goers thrilled to *Blow-up*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* and *In the Heat of the Night*, which won an Academy award.

It was a year in which J. Robert Oppenheimer died and Vladimir M. Komarov was killed during the re-entry of Soyuz I. It was a year in which Dr. Christiaan Barnard performed the world's first human heart transplant and the People's Republic of China exploded its first hydrogen bomb. It was a year in which the United States announced that its defenses included 74 commissioned nuclear submarines and President Johnson struggled to reconcile the Great Society with the spiralling costs of war in Southeast Asia. And it was in such a year that the United Presbyterian Church in the USA issued the controversial *Confession of 1967*.

The issuing of this confession was and is in itself a significant event. For it raises the question as to whether or not in a secularized, voluntaristic and pluralistic society such as ours, it is any longer possible to be a confessing church in any of the senses

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which are inherent in our Reformed tradition. Our purpose in this brief session, fifteen years after the appearance of the C-67, is to reflect on the adequacy and meaning of those statements within the document which bear upon the topic, "Creation within the love of God." That is indeed a challenging task!

I

One of the several purposes of a confession in the Reformed tradition is to speak a powerful and redemptive word in relation to pressing contemporary problems. For the *Confession of 1967* that word par excellence was reconciliation. We were then and we are now in an ever-deepening human crisis. But our perception of the extent, the dimensions, the causes and the consequences of that crisis has undergone enormous changes in the short space of a decade and a half.

To put it succinctly, we now know in ways unthinkable to most of us in the 1960s that the single great issue with which we are confronted is nothing less than that of human survival on our planet. We know that the earth's scarce resources of oil, coal, minerals and metals are indeed limited and that at present rates of consumption these non-renewable supplies will be exhausted within the predictable future. We know that the continued production of certain kinds of new chemicals, including plastics and pesticides, poisons the earth in ways and to an extent not yet fully understood. We are becoming aware of the irreversible effects of industrial and agricultural pollution on land, water and air. We are beginning to recognize the enormous chain of consequences which follow upon such things as the use of drugs and the possibilities of genetic engineering. Most of all, more and more of us are aware of the ultimate threat to human life posed by the nuclear arms race and by the further development of nuclear power for military purposes and energy production.

The inescapable irony at the root of all of these threats to human existence is that each and all are the result of the application of human creativity, a gift of God, to the creation itself. Those who have been so confident, indeed messianic, about the possibility of mastering and dominating nature through scientific knowledge and technology as a means of creating a better world of tomorrow are beginning to recognize that the "natural" results of our present efforts threaten the destruction of the very human powers which created them.

This inevitably raises fundamental questions about the nature, use and direction of our science and technology; indeed among many of us it is creating a crisis of confidence in our abilities to resolve the dilemmas in which we are caught. We no

longer know what possibilities there are for a better world of tomorrow; we have no clear and compelling vision around which to mobilize and organize our human energies. Indeed, we are increasingly surrounded by apocalyptic symbols and visions which cut the nerve of both reflection and action. In the poignant words of Paulos Mar Gregorios:

We know that consumerism is bad, but what can we do except go on consuming more and more? We know that the gap between the rich and the poor is widening, but what can we do except live with guilt and lend an occasional hand to the poor? We know that our vision of reality is defective because of too much reliance on science and technology, but what alternatives can we develop other than an odd and unsatisfying jumble of mysticism, astrology and communes? This sense of powerlessness is paralyzing.¹

What are the causes of our contemporary crisis? Doubtless they are numerous and complex, but at the center lie two fundamental and inter-related problems which demand our attention, because in the most radical sense they are theological problems.

The first arises from our view of nature itself. For several centuries, especially in the western world, we have tended to view nature as an object, or a series of objects, to be studied, quantified, manipulated and exploited for purposes determined and imposed by individuals, communities or societies (as they saw fit) on their own terms. Nature as such possessed no intrinsic meaning or value save that which was fashioned for it by human agents.

Thus, nature came to be experienced and viewed as the stuff, the raw material to be utilized in the human quest for pleasure, profit, security and particular advantage as determined by those who controlled it. It is not surprising that such a view of reality permitted and even encouraged the use of the natural world to deepen and accelerate massive political and economic forces which in turn created structures of injustice, inequity, and death.

The second problem reflects the first. Our culture has lost any vital sense of that fundamental relatedness of God, humanity and the creation. Indeed, it is out of this breakdown in our sense of relatedness that the contemporary crisis issues. It is because we do not experience and perceive a real unity of the relations of God, humanity, and creation that we do not and cannot have an adequate and integral vision of the future.

Not only has this led us to an essentially utilitarian view of nature, but it has also blinded us to the fact that as creatures at once dependent and unique, we are ourselves an integral part of the creation. We do not have an adequate vision of what might be, because as humans we have lost a common sense of our special vocation in relation both to God and to God's creation. As

a result nature is being wantonly destroyed instead of fulfilled by human activity.

II

It would be quite wrong to give the impression that theologians and others have been unresponsive to this emerging awareness of nature as a theological problem. On the contrary, it is now popular to advocate the need to develop theologies of ecology and conservation. Necessary and urgent as such a task is, it will not be accomplished easily, nor will it succeed simply by quickly conceived additions and corrections to prevailing theological formulations and traditions. The issues are too complex and far-reaching in their consequences for our total theological work to respond to treatment by superficial means.

From what sources does our theological problem with nature emerge? Is it, for example, the result of our preoccupation with history? A growing body of theological literature appears to suggest this. Such a preoccupation, it is said, has turned our attention in theology away from the natural world, which is our habitat, and away from the natural sciences, thus isolating theology from some of the most important streams of human learning in modern culture. It has contributed to humankind's sense of self-importance and insularity, for history is first and foremost the human story and it portrays the God of history as one who is principally involved in transactions and relations with humankind, despite the fact that God is said to be creator of all.

One of the most vociferous proponents of this interpretation of our problem is Lynn White, whose article "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis" set off a storm of controversy following its appearance in 1968.² Charles West offers us this summary in a provocative, unpublished paper entitled, "God-Man/Woman-Creation: Some Comments on the Ethics of the Relationship."

The Hebrew view of creation broke with all the mythologies that expressed continuity between humanity, nature and the divine. In their place a purposeful God concerned primarily with the destiny of men and women has made all things, giving to these men and women, made in God's own image, dominion over the earth and all its creatures. Christianity intensifies this extreme anthropocentrism through the divine incarnation in Christ. In at least its western Latin form, Christianity "is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen." Viewed historically, modern science is an extrapolation of natural theology, and modern technology is at least partly explained as an occidental, voluntarist realization of the Christian dogma of man's transcendence of, and rightful mastery over, nature.

46 Obviously, this critique is as provocative as it is one-sided. But the general position suggested above serves the purpose of forcing

us to look again at the historical and theological roots of our modern problem.

From the very beginning the Church experienced enormous difficulties with the Hellenistic world's conception of nature. For any community with its roots in the Old Testament this was inevitable. The concept of nature itself was totally alien to the Hebrew tradition. As a matter of fact, Hebrew vocabulary did not even contain a word corresponding to the Greek term for "nature" in its several forms. Israel's conception of the world was neither static nor eternal.

The Hebrew tradition rather spoke of *creation* as opposed to nature. Creation was a mighty act of God, as dynamic, as mysterious and as personal as was Yahweh's self. Hebrew religion did not develop a highly sophisticated metaphysics precisely because its view of creation was essentially doxological. The stories of creation and the Psalms of Praise which were part of the Hebrew tradition were not so much explanations of how things came to be, or of the ontology of existing things, but rather they pointed to the One who was and is Creator of all that is, whose splendor and majesty were reflected in creation and to whom all praise and thanksgiving must be directed. In short, the religion of Israel in its understanding of creation depicted the unfolding relations of God, humanity and universe. Bound up in one another, humankind and the universe constituted a unity which was God's creation. The story of these unfolding relations occupied Israel's attention as the dramatic history of God's saving acts directed toward the redemption of Israel, humanity and the whole creation.

The concept of nature, on the other hand, is Indo-Hellenic in its origins. On the whole it developed as a response to the quest for the origin and meaning of things apart from the activity of the one God. One could say that in most of Hellenism it functioned as a necessary god-substitute, and it is therefore no coincidence that it emphasized nature as an impersonal entity confronting humankind. Here we have no suggestion of dynamic relations among God, humankind and the universe, for nature is predominantly the non-human part of that universe from which humankind is virtually alienated.

Against this background the Church struggled, to maintain a vital continuity with its Old Testament roots and at the same time to make the Gospel intelligible to communities of men and women whose cultures were influenced by the religious and philosophical currents of the classical world. The stories of its successes and failures fill the annals of church history. The Church was immediately confronted with conflicting claims: Jew against Greek, law against freedom, body against soul, spirit

against matter, etc. None of these conflicting claims was more fundamental or significant than that between the Greek concept of nature and the Semitic view of history.

In its formulation and proclamation of the Christian message the Church sought to transcend, to transform and to reconcile these dichotomies and dualisms through its understanding of God's redeeming activity in Christ. In the face of mutually exclusive views of nature and history the Church asserted that all that exists is the creation of God and has been redeemed in Christ. Nowhere is this more vividly illustrated than in the magnificent Christological hymn found in the first chapter of the letter to the Colossians.

The Colossian problem lay in the belief that there were "thrones, dominions, principalities and authorities" which existed apart from Christ and exercised powers which were entirely their own. In other words, reality was dualistically conceived, and part of that duality was believed to exist independently from the Lordship of the Creator and the Creator's redeeming acts in Christ. Left unchallenged such a notion would have limited the Church's understanding of the power of Christ to the purely moral and spiritual dimensions of reality.

Against such a possibility the passage accents the connection between Christ, on the one hand, and *ta panta*, all things, on the other. No less than six times in the space of five verses these *ta panta* are sounded, indicating that all things in heaven and on earth, whether visible or invisible were created in Him, through Him and for Him. Of particular significance for us is the fact that the text also indicates that all things were reconciled to God through Christ who makes "peace by the blood of his cross." This is nothing less than a cosmic Christology; a Christology in which nothing is left unclaimed for God who was pleased to dwell fully in the Christ. God's act of redemption as understood by the Church was thus not to be limited to humanity or to human society or to human history, but extended to the farthest reaches of the creation itself. To claim less than this was to admit to a dualism which condemned the physical universe as evil, leaving it beyond the transforming power of Christ.

By implication human redemption would then have to be understood as an escape or release from the physical world. This was of course precisely the view of many both inside and outside the Church, not least among them the Gnostics. But it was not to be so. Cosmic Christology maintained the relations of God, humanity and universe in continuity with the biblical tradition. Humankind was to be redeemed in and with the creation, not in isolation from it. The telos of all things now found expression in the Church's eschatological vision of a new heaven and a new

earth, in which a new Jerusalem formed a place of habitation for a new humanity reconstituted in Christ.

In both Colossians and Ephesians, then, we have examples of a strong, unitary cosmic Christology which significantly influenced the development of early Christian doctrine. But the challenge and temptation of dualism was by no means eliminated and has continued to appear and reappear under various guises to the present day. Among these one must include the dualisms of Church and world, spiritual and temporal, secular and sacred. Such divisive views of reality were never appropriate to the organic character of biblical vision and speech, and in relation to our central concern none was perhaps more damaging than the duality of nature and grace which developed in medieval western Christianity.

I do not wish to caricature or make light of the great achievements of medieval Catholicism, but it does seem to me that the wedge which it drove between the notions of nature and grace had enormous consequences for the development of science and technology. In its affirmation that nature had its own constitution, given to it by God, and governed by its own laws of operation without reference to humanity, we have the beginnings of the objectification and alienation of the non-human or physical parts of creation. To be sure, humans also have a nature, but they can be saved only by that grace which comes to them from the supernatural realm outside of creation. That grace, whose primary function is to remove sin, has of course nothing to do with physical nature, which because it has not sinned does not stand in any need of grace or redemption.

Thus the relations of God, humanity and the universe formerly included in the Church's understanding of creation and redemption were fundamentally altered. Nature became merely the stage on which the relations of God and humanity took place. It was no longer in any significant sense a participant in these relations. Nature and history had once again been placed at odds with one another. The cosmic Christology of Colossians and Ephesians was so radically reduced to the realms of the historical and the moral as the sole arenas of grace that the biblical Christology of nature was left without significant effect.

It must be said that in Luther and Calvin the sovereignty, scope and grandeur of grace was once again liberated. Wherever their influence has prevailed the power of cosmic Christology has been in large measure recovered. But, alas, that reclamation of the realm of nature as a realm of grace was allowed by post-Reformation developments to recede once again far into the background.

In the Renaissance and the Enlightenment the process of this

divorce was completed. When Giordano Bruno and others who followed his lead came to view nature itself as dynamic and infinite there was no longer any role for the concept of God to play. All metaphysical needs could be fulfilled by an autonomous nature. It only remained for Spinoza and others to complete the identification of God with nature, since two infinities could not be conceived.

Within the Church, rationalism restricted redemption by grace to the moral soul, while pietism focused upon the moral and the mystical. As a result one might say that within western culture a bit of God died with each new conquest of nature and its secrets. The realm of grace thus was reduced as more and more of the structure of nature was occupied by an alienated and autonomous humankind.

Throughout these developments in western Christianity persons and movements did swim against the mainstream. In the gentle St. Francis, among late medieval mystics, in reformers of the sixteenth and later centuries and in more contemporary figures such as Alfred North Whitehead and Teilhard de Chardin we have examples of those whose visions of reality and whose values ran counter to the prevailing streams of culture. But taken together these have as yet been no match for the powerful rising tide of a civilization shaped by modern science and technology.

III

Yet, cosmic Christology with all of its implications for the unity of relations among God, humanity and the universe never fully disappeared from the consciousness of western Christianity; it was all the more so a continuing and dominant theme in the life of the Eastern Orthodox churches through the centuries. From Ireneus to Athanasius, from Gregory of Nyssa to Maximus the Confessor, from Gregory Palamas to Vladimir Solovyev, the task remained central of clarifying and proclaiming the compelling vision of a cosmos, of *ta panta*, all things, caught in the grip of death and yet now being transformed by the life-giving incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. The tradition which they represent has resisted the temptations of a dualism of nature and grace.

This resistance has its roots in the way in which the relations between God and the creation are conceived. Orthodox theology has sought to hold in tension a basic conceptual distinction between created being and uncreated being, between the unknowable divine essence or *ousia* and the divine energies (*energeia*), between the absolute transcendence of God in relation to creation and God's immanence or presence to everything which God made. God's *ousia* or being remains inaccessible to our concepts

or words, since God is beyond being and non-being as the source of all that is. We can only speak of such a reality by negation. But God as immanent is the true being of all beings; God's energy, in other words, is manifest in creation. Affirmations about God relate to God's energy, and hence it is only of God's self-manifestation in creation that we can have partial knowledge of God, and indeed relationship to God.

Because of the incarnation of Jesus Christ God and human-kind are no longer totally other. For across the gap, the *diastema*, between the creation and the creator, the creator God has come in person. The whole status of creation was thus transformed when the Creator crossed the *diastema* and through the tearing of his own body opened the way for us to participate in God's purposes for creation. Creation has now in the fullest sense become God-bearing. Not as individuals, however, but rather as the whole pleroma or fullness of creation are we to experience the moving across the gap and into the glory and presence of God. For all levels of reality are now dependent, not only on each other, but on that single reality of the energies of God. Both humanity and physical nature are equally dependent upon the energies of God for their continual existence. Both must be liberated from death and transformed by God for life in God's kingdom. And humankind now has a special vocation, a priestly calling, to participate with God in that liberation of the realm of nature.

For the masses of Orthodox faithful who stand in the Liturgy under a dome which symbolizes the universe, this experience of personal and cosmic salvation is dramatically rehearsed day after day as an event both present and promised. It is an unfolding drama which engages all the senses and untiringly points to the mystery of God who is at once the source of all things and that one for whom all creation groans in travail as it waits for its full consummation.

In the provocative words of Olivier Clement, a contemporary French Orthodox theologian:

If the spiritual destiny of man is inseparable from that of humanity as a whole, it is also inseparable from that of the terrestrial cosmos. The sensible universe as a whole constitutes, in fact, a prolongation of our bodies. Or rather, what is our body, if it is not the form imprinted by our living soul on the universal 'dust' which unceasingly penetrates and traverses us? There is no discontinuity between the flesh of the world and human flesh; the universe participates in human nature, as it constitutes the body of humanity. . . . Man is the personality of the cosmos, its conscious and personal self-expression, it is he who gives meaning to things and who has to transfigure them. For the universe, man is the hope to receive grace and to be united with God; Man is also the possibility of failure and loss for the universe. Let us recall the fundamental text in Romans 8:22. Subject to disorder and death by our fall,

the creation waits also for man's becoming Son of God by grace, which would mean liberation and glory for it also. We are responsible for the world, to the very smallest twigs and plants. We are the word, the "logos" by which the world expresses itself, by which the world speaks to God, it depends on us whether it blasphemes or it prays, whether it becomes an illusion or wisdom, black magic or celebration. Only through us can the cosmos, as the prolongation of our bodies have access to eternity. How strange all this must sound to modern minds! This is our evil, our sin, our freedom led astray to vamparize nature; it is we who are responsible for the carcasses and the twisted trees which pollution produces, it is our refusal to love that baffles the sad eyes of so many animals. But every time a human being becomes aware of the cosmic significance of the eucharist, each time a pure being receives a humble sensation with gratitude—whether he eats a piece of fruit or inhales the fragrance of the earth—a sort of joy of eternity reverberates in the marrow of things.³

I do not cite this material from the eastern Christian tradition to suggest that it is there that we shall find an answer to our theological or historical problems with nature. Our contemporary issues are neither eastern nor western in character, but universal. There is no possibility of retreating to past historical and cultural eras or theological systems just as we cannot simply "return to nature," as some among us advocate. Nevertheless, it is only in reflecting seriously upon our past and upon the experiences and traditions of the whole Christian family that we may find the courage, the clues and the resources to meet the enormous challenge, risk, and danger of the future.

In that regard, eastern Christianity challenges us to think afresh about the human vocation in creation, the priestly calling of the new humanity in Christ. What does it mean for those of us in the Reformed tradition with our strong emphasis upon creation as the theater of God's glory to seek in our terms to understand the image of God in human beings, an image restored in us and to us by Christ, as that which we should seek to have reflected in our relations with nature? Put another way, what does it mean to humanize nature in the image of God? In what sense is the command given us to have dominion in creation a calling not to dominate nature but to rediscover and make visible in the natural world the mystery and majesty of God? How shall we deal with the issues of eco-justice while at the same time we seek to heal the brutalized body of nature? In relation to such issues our tradition is rich with clues and possibilities.

The *Confession of 1967* clearly reflects this fact. In 9.12 it recognizes that because of sin and its consequences human beings become exploiters and despoilers of the world. In 9.16 it affirms that the world in all its natural diversity reflects to the eye of faith the majesty and mystery of God. 9.17 is a call to develop and protect the resources of nature for the common welfare. One

might well conclude that ahead of its time, the *Confession* foresaw something of our present crisis and warned of both its origins and consequences. No less important, in 9.26 the *Confession* speaks of the resurrection as a sign that God will consummate and bring to fulfillment the work of creation and reconciliation begun in Christ, and 9.36 admonishes the Church to pray for and present the world to God in worship. Finally and of great significance in the third section, entitled "The Fulfillment of Reconciliation" the *Confession* affirms without ambiguity that God's redeeming work in Jesus Christ includes the natural environment as exploited and despoiled by sin (9.53).

The *Confession* does, however, still speak in language which suggests that creation is primarily to be understood as "the sphere of God's dealings" with humanity (9.16) and thus fails to evoke strong, pulsating images of a cosmic Christology. Though not exclusively so, it also raises the issue of nature in relation to historical, political and moral spheres and thus needs to be strengthened with regard to what we have called the integral relations of God, humanity, and the universe. And these relations, as our theme suggests, are grounded in God's powerful, self-giving love to all that God has created and redeemed in Jesus Christ our Lord.

In this regard perhaps the one most powerful element in the *Confession of 1967* is its overarching understanding of reconciliation as a reality and promise. If we can reclaim this term from its narrower frame of reference and begin as a church to see in its rich imagery the grand design of God to reconcile all things, *ta panta*, to Godself, then we shall begin to understand the meaning of our relations with the natural world in fresh and compelling ways. For in the final sense we must as Christians hope for nothing less than the healing and the restoring to wholeness of those broken relations with God which have brought death to humanity and to the creation which is our home.

This paper has not sought to propose specific answers to the awful dilemmas in which we find ourselves today. It has simply tried to understand those problems more clearly and to set them within a theological framework. This process, however, has relentlessly driven the paper to call emphatically for a cosmic Christology wide and deep and rich enough to inform and encompass the dilemmas of the last quarter of our violent and turbulent century. As Joseph Sittler suggested in his address to the third Assembly of the World Council of Churches,⁴ are we not called once again to fashion a Christology catholic enough to affirm redemption's force enfolding nature, as we have affirmed redemption's force enfolding history? Are we not being driven to claim the world of nature for God's Christ just as in the time of

Augustine the Church was driven to claim the world of history as the City of God, for Christ's Lordship and purpose? When millions of the world's people, inside the Church and outside of it, know that damnation now threatens nature as absolutely as it has always threatened human societies in history, must we not declare with all the grace of faith in us that the God who has turned death into life, who has transformed endings into beginnings, calls us to act with care for God's wounded creation, to say yes to life!

NOTES

¹ Paulos Mar Gregorios, *The Human Presence: An Orthodox View of Nature* (Geneva: The World Council of Churches, 1978), p. 7.

² Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis" in *Machina Ex Deo*. Cambridge, Mass., 1968.

³ Olivier Clement "L'homme dans le monde," in *Verbo Caro*, XII:45 (1958), 11f.

⁴ Joseph Sittler, "Called to Unity," *The Ecumenical Review*, XIV:2 (January, 1962), 175-87.