

One

Creation

God and Certainty
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Theology or Epistemology?

The Christian doctrine of creation has been enjoying the limelight lately. Newspapers report school board battles over teaching evolution in schools; newsmagazines rehash conversations about the relationship between science and faith. Unfortunately, while the media are paying attention to the topic of creation, they are not paying attention to the actual theology of creation. The debate around evolution and creationism is not about the doctrine of creation, but primarily about how we know things, or epistemology.¹ School boards engage in brouhahas over the teaching of evolution, but actually they are grappling with questions of how we know the world around us. Do we know about the world through science, religion, or both?

Many scientists and science-appreciating people simply view science and religion as two separate ways of knowing. Science is the way of knowing that should be taught in science class in a public school in a country that separates church and state. Religion is the way of knowing that should be taught in religious institutions and families. People who feel this way are not necessarily negating religious views of creation, but they believe that such views are not science. They do not fall within the purview of a discipline devoted to explanations of the natural order.

Similarly, many Christians find no problem believing both that God created the world and that Darwin was probably right about the process of evolution. They can imagine that the workings of evolution are part of God's creative process. Next to the challenge of believing that Jesus is both fully God and fully human, or that God is both one and three, holding together creation and evolution doesn't seem that difficult.

However, some Christians find a deep incompatibility between the biblical account of creation and a Darwinian depiction of the world evolving into its present state. Some reject the immense age of the universe implied in the evolutionary view, believing that the Bible presents a much younger world. Some cherish the notion that God created each type of animal with its current features intact and bristle at the thought that major characteristics of animals (including humans) have changed significantly over time. And some view the theory of evolution as an explanation of how we came to be that writes God out of the picture, reducing humanity to a product of random chance in a world that is not ultimately ordered by the love of God, but rather is an outgrowth of biological processes with no greater purpose than species survival. For some Christians who see evolution and creation as incompatible, the theory of evolution veils a picture of the universe unhinged from any greater meaning than what we can manage to scrape out of our own lives day by day.

Biblical Accounts of Creation

Often these various concerns are anchored to the idea that evolution contradicts the accounts of creation offered in Genesis. Creationists want a more literal reading of the biblical text. Looking closely at the creation stories in Genesis, however, raises questions about whether a literal reading is appropriate. There are two stories of creation in Genesis, which seem to have been formed in different contexts and with different aims.²

In the first story, God creates through a series of declamations (“Let there be light!”). Biblical scholars think this narrative was formed during the Babylonian exile, when the Hebrew people were struggling to understand their faith and its similarities to and differences from the beliefs of people around them.³ The shape of the story follows the same pattern as a Babylonian creation tale, the *Enuma Elish*. The similarity of structure makes the differences stand out quite clearly. The primary difference is that the *Enuma Elish* depicts the world as arising from a divine dispute between two deities. Marduk kills Tiamat, and her slain body becomes the universe.⁴ The blood of her consort, Kingu, is mixed with clay to form humankind, a race intended to serve the deities.⁵ In stark contrast, this first creation story in the book of Genesis makes it very clear that the universe is not the result of an argument between multiple gods, but is created intentionally by the one almighty God.⁶ Humankind is not a race of servants, but a race of creatures made in the image of God.⁷

The second biblical story of creation includes the creation of humanity from the earth and the account of Adam and Eve’s exile from the Garden of Eden. This is thought to be a combination of two previously existing stories. This narrative describes and accounts for the ambiguity of creation—for both the profound goodness of creation and the painful realities of sin and evil, for both the nearness of God and the distance of God.⁸

As is the case with many other biblical texts, it is difficult to read these stories literally. Like the stories of Saul becoming king and of Jesus' birth, these creation stories offer more than one account of what happened, and they cannot be neatly merged into one factual report of historical events or scientific processes. Such multiplicity poses the question: How can both accounts be true? The answer: Both can be true if one understands these stories to be neither science nor history.

Modern Confrontations

In his influential book *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, Christian theologian Hans Frei argues that the nineteenth century saw a major shift in how Christians interpreted the Bible. Prior to that time, he contends, Christians understood the Bible to be the major overarching truth of the world into which all other accounts of reality fit. The biblical narrative was the lens through which all other information was viewed. The Bible was seen as a supple, abundant text that could be interpreted in various overlapping ways. It could be read literally, allegorically, typologically, and so on.⁹ This rich text contained more meaning than could possibly be gained by any one person, method, or even generation.

Then changes began to happen in the West. Beginning in the seventeenth century, throughout the early modern period and the Enlightenment, deep shifts occurred in epistemology, in the understanding of how we know things. Rationality came to the fore as the primary—perhaps the only—legitimate way of knowing. Modern science was seen as a clear path to objective knowledge, and factual accuracy became the indispensable measure of truth.

These developments had significant influence on how the Bible was read and interpreted. The Bible moved from being the

overarching truth into which all other forms of truth fit into being merely one source of truth within a worldview dominated by rationality and historicity. It was a tremendous paradigm shift: instead of seeing the world through the lens of the Bible, Christians began to see the Bible through the lens of the world.¹⁰ People began asking—often and seriously—if the stories in the Bible were reasonable, factual, and historically accurate. Some people attempted to discredit Christianity by pointing out ways in which biblical narratives apparently fall short of these standards.

Many Christians sought to defend the Bible. Some did so by arguing that the biblical stories *are* reasonable, factual, and accurate—that they do meet the standards of modern reason, science, and history. Others did so by arguing that the Bible is not history or science, but myth. As myth, the Bible conveys universal truths, truths that ultimately reside outside the text, and therefore are untouched by scientific and historic challenges.

Focusing on developments of the nineteenth century, Frei argues that these methods of defending Christianity were more dangerous than the attack. Recognizing the narrative structure of much of the Bible—the structure that is “eclipsed” by reading the Bible as history or myth—is critical to unlocking the supple meanings of the text. In narrative, the meaning of the text is inseparable from the stories themselves. The meaning cannot be conveyed just as well by another historical account of the same events or by another myth with the same moral. Rather, the meaning of narrative is inextricably bound to these particular stories. Frei contends that it is wrong-headed to defend the Bible as accurate history or admirable myth. Such defenses flatten and distort not only the meaning of the Bible for Christians, but the way in which the Bible *creates meaning*, because narrative meaning is more multilayered, evocative, contextual, and communal than historical knowledge or universal morals learned from myths.

We can see something of this in a mundane example. My mother tells a story of how I came to her crying when I was five years old. I had just heard the story of Adam and Eve in the garden for the first time. I was devastated by the idea that Eve had disobeyed God, confused by the idea that the good creation got spoiled, and scared of a snake that could speak. While some sort of conversation like this surely happened, my mother does not tell this story to accurately and objectively recount a past event. She tells it to illustrate that I was always interested in theology and to simultaneously brag about my precocious questioning and complain about what she had to put up with in raising a theologically inquisitive child. Her telling of it and my hearing form part of our current relationship and can be most fully understood in the context of that relationship.

Our stories convey multiple meanings on many levels all at once. The stories of the Bible do likewise, only exponentially more so. If our own family stories are shaped to relate more than one truth at a time, surely the stories of the Bible are further saturated with meaning, with layers of truth that can be accessed through different methods of interpretation and different experiential perspectives.

Seen in light of Frei's analysis, arguments that declare the historical and scientific accuracy of the biblical creation narratives look like attempts to reduce the rich text of the Bible to the level of a lab report. Such arguments make science, in which procedures are noted exactly, the standard by which the Bible is judged. They overlook the many pliable and subtle ways in which these stories convey meaning, focusing on one form of meaning that fits neither the time nor the genre of these texts.

This problem is exacerbated by the current generation of creationists, those who talk of intelligent design. Like many savvy conservatives, proponents of intelligent design intend to put forth their

argument in terms that are unimpeachable by secular standards. So they leave out all mention of God and the Bible, speaking instead of teaching a diversity of views and fostering debate and critical examination of theories. They attempt to argue on scientific grounds that Darwin's theory has holes. More specifically, they claim that creatures exhibit characteristics that cannot be explained with the logic of evolution.¹¹ They then assert that these characteristics, and the universe as a whole, are better accounted for by the idea that the cosmos is the product of an (unidentified) intelligent designer. The trouble is, there is no clear science behind these assertions. Furthermore, these claims betray the methodological naturalism to which science as a discipline is committed. This is not science; it is creationism reworked.

Not all Christians who oppose evolution support intelligent design. Some Christians who reject evolution also reject attempts to push intelligent design into public schools. They say the battle is lost when Christians stop talking about God, leaving the designer unidentified.

I say the battle was first invented, then surrendered, when proponents of intelligent design decided that science was the lens through which to view the Bible. It is not a science book. There are many excellent science textbooks available. None of them comes close to containing and engendering as much meaning as the Bible. None evokes my devotion, guides my life, or shapes the questions of my existence.

Why do people do this? Why do they fight the tough battle of convincing Americans that the Bible is a science book when it is so much more? One important reason concerns epistemology. Proponents of intelligent design have, on some level, bought into the modern mind-set that science provides the kind of meaning that matters most. Therefore, if the Bible is to retain its significance, it must offer science. More specifically, it must offer certainty.

The Modern Quest for Certainty

The modern era has been marked by a quest for certainty, a hope of finding secure knowledge to anchor human endeavors in a confusing world.¹² Scholars pinpoint the beginning of the modern era at different points in time. I like to point to a writing by Descartes called *Discourse on Method*. In this deceptively slim volume, Descartes lays out the underpinnings of the modern preoccupation with epistemology. He wrote at a time when Europe had been plagued by multiple wars, many related to religious issues; when frightening climatic changes had decreased crop yields and seriously affected human life; when scientific discoveries in many different fields had shattered stable worldviews and opened up whole new ways of looking at the world; when increasing cultural diversity and religious pluralism confronted Christians with the challenges of different perspectives. In the midst of this confusion, Descartes recognized that his view of the world would have been quite different had he been born in another culture. His example is this: the same man would be quite different were he raised in Europe or among “the cannibals.”¹⁵ Descartes was aware that his own social location and upbringing had profoundly shaped his view of the world around him and that the same was true for other people. Many of the disagreements that lead to conflict and warfare could be avoided, he hoped, if people could peel away the influence of culture in order to get to the basic truths on which we can all agree.

We can recognize this logic. In a time of warfare, don't we all think that surely, as reasonable people with some bare minimum of common sense, we ought to be able to figure out a better way to settle disputes than this? Can't we tap into our common humanity, start with what we do agree on, and go from there?

In the turbulent context of the seventeenth century, Descartes wanted to find a firm foundation for human knowledge. He wanted

to find some baseline or touchstone that all human beings could agree on, that would cut across cultural dividing lines and form the basis of peaceful human relations. Descartes was confronted with a confusing and dangerous world, and he wanted to find some bit of certainty to hang on to, to build on. This desire was fueled by the beginning of modern science, which was just starting to offer the enticing possibility of objective knowledge, which would be demonstrably true for any person, anywhere, regardless of culture. In *Discourse on Method*, Descartes pursues the two related goals of finding the firm foundation of human knowledge and of providing an account of the emerging scientific methodology.

The most famous passage in the book is when Descartes decides that to find such a sturdy foundation, he must first raze the flawed construction of cultural beliefs that muddy his thinking. He decides that to find the certain truth, he must first doubt everything. He sits in front of a fire and attempts to doubt all things. He finds that there is one thing he cannot doubt—his own thinking: “I think, therefore I am.”¹⁴

This is arguably the beginning of modernity, which is not really a time period but rather a worldview. The modern worldview is a way of thinking that we in the West are familiar with because it still prevails today. It is centered on the human person, seen first as an autonomous, rational individual. It privileges the mind over the body, asserting that a person can peel away the layers of influence of her or his particular physical, social, and cultural location to get to the unhindered truth. It claims that there is value in rigorously questioning all of our assumptions. It believes that if we all think clearly enough, rationally enough, we will all reach the same conclusions. It exalts reason as the primary characteristic of humanity. Underneath all of this there is a belief in a singular, stable Truth that we can find if we think well enough.¹⁵ So the task is to find it, to find that certain truth and hold on tight.

We are, in many ways, in a similar situation to that of Descartes. There are wars around the globe, increasing bloodshed tied to religious commitments. Climate change is affecting us, with more devastating events, such as hurricanes and mudslides, and a frightening outlook. Diversity and pluralism continue to challenge us daily, and we escape through nostalgic fictions of a unified past. So many of us, like Descartes, are looking for certainty. There are Christians who want the Bible to be that pure touchstone of knowledge, who want the creationist certainty of knowing that the world is made according to God's exact specifications, part of a divine plan and under divine control. Likewise, there is a minority report among science buffs who look to further scientific research to disprove God's existence, or at least provide the scientific explanation for the human need to invent God.¹⁶ Such persons look to science for the certainty of cause, effect, and explanation, for predictable outcomes and the exclusion of what is beyond human knowledge. In some ways these polar opposites are actually two sides of the same coin—both groups are continuing the profoundly modern quest for certain knowledge.

Postmodern Questioning

If modernity is a particular way of seeing the world instead of a time period, then it does not end on a given date when a new era begins. Instead, there is a shift in worldviews that happens slowly as the old perspective becomes less persuasive and a new perspective becomes dominant. Whether we are now seeing the demise of modernity, or are perhaps still in modernity's early stages, is a decision that will have to be made far in the future. However, it is clear that the basic tenets of modernity have come under attack from several quarters. Many of the criticisms can be loosely grouped together under the umbrella term *postmodernism*.

While much of the lingo of postmodernism is confusing and off-putting, the basic sense of what it is about is fairly straightforward. Postmodernism is a sustained critique of modernity that is taking place in many different fields, from philosophy and religious studies to theatre, art, and architecture. This critique is not something wholly new and different from modernity. It is the logical outgrowth and radicalization of modernity itself. Recall Descartes's understanding that culture shapes how we know the world and his determination to doubt everything he thought he knew. He believed he could peel away the layers of cultural influence, present in his own assumptions, to get to the firm knowledge of reason. Postmodernism takes Descartes's own project further by doubting the assumptions Descartes himself missed. If good thinking requires questioning all assumptions, then eventually the assumptions of modernity come into question. Postmodernism, then, is the exposing and questioning of unacknowledged assumptions behind modernity.¹⁷

So a postmodernist might point out that Descartes did not question everything. He did not question his belief that there is a universal human reason beneath cultural influence or his idea that if we all could think clearly enough, we would agree. He assumed that layers of cultural influence *could* be peeled away and that doing so would reveal a firm center of Truth.

Perhaps, such a postmodernist might suggest, we can keep peeling layers forever because there is no core. Maybe we cannot peel them at all, because that would require that we step out of our own skin. Descartes assumed we could step out of our own cultural location long enough to see which parts of our worldview are culturally inherited and which parts are grounded in reason. Maybe we cannot do that.

Postmodern critiques take many forms and cannot be reduced to a single attack on modernity or a single intellectual standpoint.

This is why *postmodernism* is an umbrella term that covers many different ideas, theories, and authors. One idea that is used in many forms of postmodernism is that of social construction. This idea has roots in the early modern period. The Enlightenment emphasis on education stemmed from a recognition that training could deeply influence a person. Descartes himself understood that his own upbringing profoundly shaped his view of the world, as illustrated in his remarks about cannibalism.

Postmodernism takes this modern insight further, looking closely at how social location and experience shape how we know, how we behave, and who we are. Various postmodern scholars suggest that knowledge is socially constructed (such as the knowledge that cannibalism is wrong), that gender is socially constructed (girls learn to be feminine in response to cultural expectations), and that the human person is socially constructed (I come to be myself in relation to other people over time). Again, none of these points is unique to postmodernism—each has its roots in modernity—but postmodernism develops them all.

The idea of social construction relies on seeing human beings as communal and social. We learn how to think and act in a community, which has practices and institutions set up to teach us how to think and act. Many ideas and ways of life that we think of as simply normal or natural, or that we don't even think of at all but just take for granted, are actually things that we learn in community. Those practices and institutions are also things that are created by the community over time. There are cycles of communal meaning-making that form us, that socially construct much of our reality.

Some of these cycles are deeply destructive. Examples from the early modern period include the horrors of slavery and the oppression of women. Since modernity defines humans as primarily rational, the more rational someone is, the more human he or

she is. Conversely, people associated more with the body than with the mind, such as mothers and enslaved African Americans, were seen as less rational and less human. Since they were viewed as less rational, women and African Americans were understood to be suited to work related to the body and, therefore, to need less education. The lack of education and restriction to bodily work furthered the appearance of deficient rationality. It is impossible to determine where the circle starts—there is no answer to the chicken-egg question. But it is possible to see how human cultural conventions become so entrenched that the reality that they are human conventions is forgotten. Instead, they are seen as givens, as natural. Then they may be defended on those very grounds. It is unnatural for women to spend their days reading and writing! Postmodernism exposes such cycles, pointing out the ways in which human cultures create meanings then forget that such meanings are the products of their own creation.

Some postmodern authors take social construction quite far, asserting that there is no meaning that has not been constructed by human communities over time. Other postmodernists take a more moderate view. If there is a core of meaning that is not socially constructed, we have to acknowledge that our access to it is socially constructed. The way that we perceive, interpret, act on, and value any core knowledge will be profoundly influenced by the social construction of our realities. My way of knowing the world has been so profoundly formed by my particular culture that I will see everything—no matter how different—through that lens.¹⁸

While there is a spectrum of postmodern positions on the depth of social construction, most of them are still quite threatening to a desire for scientific certainty about God. Even the more moderate views demand that we grapple with the difficulty of knowing about God through texts written and interpreted by humans, through experiences shaped by cultural patterns and norms, and through

traditions created by human communities. While moderate postmodern views acknowledge that there may well be a God outside of human social construction, they also challenge us to recognize that all knowledge of God is enabled and limited by our socially constructed ways of knowing.

A more extreme postmodern position would be that God is socially constructed. Again, like many things postmodern, this idea is not new, but rather has strong roots in modernity. One clear root to this idea is the work of Ludwig Feuerbach, a nineteenth-century philosopher who offered one of the first “projection” theories of religion. The basic idea is that humanity projects its highest hopes and aspirations for human goodness and meaning onto the sky, creating an image of the Holy that then serves to inspire and guide human beings. For Feuerbach, this was not an antireligious idea; rather, it was an affirmation of the Holy and the Divine, which he understood to be the communally sanctified human desire for good. Others, such as Sigmund Freud, have used similar projection theories to dismiss religion altogether or to understand it as a negative phenomenon. Among postmodernists who consider God a social construction, a similar diversity of views is evident. Some are faithful Christians who believe that human beings create the Holy through ritual, prayer, kindness, and love. A cathedral can be a sacred space not because God somehow shows up there, but because generations of believing Christians have met there to pray, to imagine a better world, to tend the needs of others, and to affirm the importance of beauty. Others believe that humans have created a false God and forgotten that this God is our own creation.

Modernity asks, how do we cast the influence of culture aside so we can get to what is given, the Truth above and beneath human culture? Strong forms of postmodernity ask, what if what you think is given is actually something created? What if our creating goes further and further down, perhaps infinitely so? What if there is

no Truth with a capital *T*, but rather just endless layers of human production of meaning, various interpretations without a stable anchor or divine arbiter?

This type of postmodern questioning thrives on college campuses and in urban coffee shops. Yet its influence has expanded and is felt in much of mainstream American culture. The idea of social construction is persuasive, and many postmodern questions follow logically from it. Books and films have been showing these ideas in different forms—from Faulkner novels to Matrix movies—for decades. At the same time, the pluralism and diversity of the contemporary world influence our daily lives—lives that often feel fragmented, disjointed, and profoundly uncertain. Many people who could not begin to define the term *postmodern* nonetheless experience and understand the questions postmodernism raises. While we still are surrounded by the modern worldview, it is not as reassuring as it once was.

Faith and the Doctrine of Creation

I suspect that the creeping onslaught of postmodernism has something to do with the current liveliness of the creationism debate. We are facing many challenges similar to those Descartes encountered, only ours come in more extreme postmodern forms. In response, some people on both sides of the creationism debate demand—as Descartes did—human certainty. Some choose the certainty of relentless cause and effect without room for mystery or miracle; others choose the certainty of biblical stories as accurate historical, scientific data that cannot be questioned. For many of us, however, these are unattractive options.

Theory, history, and theology all give us reasons to be wary of the quest for certainty. Postmodernism (and its many modern precursors) has taught us that social construction shapes how we

know. Globalization helps us to recognize, as travel did for Descartes, that location and culture deeply influence how we see the world. Theory thus reveals that the certainty of human knowledge is often an illusion. Furthermore, we have seen how the bright shining ideals of modernity—liberty, equality, and brotherhood—have often come to ruin when groups were certain that their view, and no other, was correct. History teaches us that absolute certainty about one's own knowledge often accompanies oppression of those who see the world differently. From both theory and history, we have learned to value a bit of epistemic humility. We have learned that it is wise not to grasp too tightly for certainty, not to imagine that we know it all.

Theology can also speak to this issue in a number of different ways. From such thinkers as Hans Frei (and many others), Christians can learn to think carefully before allowing the modern, secular world to set the terms of the debate. The modern period is marked by an obsession with epistemology—with figuring out precisely how and what humans know. This spotlight on epistemology leaves many things shadowed and out of view. When this light is directed at Christianity, the fullness of Christian faith is reduced to a particular way of knowing. All of the rituals, practices, service, ethics, communion, and community that are an enormous part of Christianity go unseen. If Christians view our own tradition through the lens of modern epistemology—with its passion for certainty—we see only a thin, dim, and listless reflection of ourselves.

Faith looks quite different when it is understood in terms of Christian theology rather than modern epistemology. From a theological viewpoint, faith is not a second-best form of scientific certainty, or even a superior form of the same, but rather an upwelling of trust within relationships of love. Faith does not attempt to reduce the mystery of God to a factual statement that can be comprehended by the human mind. Faith is embodied, enacted,

communal, and performative. Faith is life lived out of, and into, the abundant meaning that God grants to human life.

As Christian faith is not merely a way of knowing, the doctrine of creation is not a foundation on which to build a stronghold of modern certainty. It is neither an antidote for postmodern pluralism and fragmentation nor an escape route out of the diverse and confusing realm of contemporary intellectual conversation. Instead of offering certainty, the doctrine of creation provides rich resources for understanding what it means to be human in relationship with God and with the world around us. These resources begin with the biblical stories and with the comforting, challenging assertions these stories hold.

In our lives we encounter mind-boggling goodness and heart-rending evil. The doctrine of creation reminds us that as destructive and painful as this world truly is, it is also deeply, profoundly, and primarily good. Without negating the reality of pain and suffering, the Christian doctrine of creation assures us that the universe is good and—despite abundant evidence to the contrary!—so are we. I personally find this to be the most challenging claim in all of Christian theology. What kind of goodness can be attributed to all of creation, including humanity? Is creation aesthetically good, morally good, or simply intrinsically valuable? While I believe much of creation is good in these ways, there is too much suffering, cruelty, and waste in the world for me to easily ascribe these kinds of goodness to the whole cosmos. Thus for me, the goodness of creation, from which stems its beauty, morality, and value, is a theological affirmation based on the provenance of creation, as attested to in the biblical texts. The cosmos is good because it is created by God, declared good by God and ordained to eternal goodness with God.

The doctrine of creation also assures us that the universe is not an accident. It is not a product of chance or the by-product of an

argument between beings more powerful than ourselves. Creation is the handiwork of a loving and powerful God. Much of the world as we know it came to be through long, slow processes, both biological and cultural. But the meaning of the world exceeds human culture and human knowledge. The world is held within a larger matrix of meaning; it rests within the arms of a loving God.

We live in a moment when the meaning that humanity has been making of creation is quite frightening. We have brought the earth to the brink of nuclear disaster, are in the midst of raging ecological destruction, and face stark predictions of climatic nightmares in the future. In this context the affirmation that the meaning of creation is not entirely constructed by human culture does not mean we are off the hook. Tilting between modernity and postmodernity, our theological reflections on creation must reckon with our own meaning-making power while acknowledging (gratefully) that not all meaning is produced by humanity. God creates the universe, loves and delights in it. The meaning that we make of and in this creation ought to honor and reflect this divine provenance. Creation is a gift from God; it is grace, and the proper human response should include humility and gratitude.

It is important to recognize what theological work the doctrine of creation does and does not do. The theological content of the Christian doctrine of creation does not offer Cartesian certainty to stave off the confusion of diversity, the perils of religious warfare, and the dread of climate change. Instead, basic theological affirmations, rooted in the biblical accounts of creation, provide a framework for rich reflections on how Christian faith—in all its dimensions—lives the relationship between humanity, cosmos, and Creator.

One further comment regarding the crucial but limited scope of the doctrine of creation: The most thoughtful reservations about evolution that I have ever heard come from undergraduate students. If creation happens through evolution, it is a long process in

which the future is a product of the past. This worries some of my students, who hear in the gospel the possibility of something truly new, of a future that is not just the outgrowth of the past. These students worry that when Christians accept that creation could happen through evolution, we give up believing in a God who can interrupt this linear progression with transformative grace. They want to believe that God continues to introduce miraculous and new realities—that such divine power was not limited to the first instant of the cosmos.

Let me be clear that these students are not desperate for specific reenactments of biblical miracles. Rational, modern intellectuals, they are not expecting the blind to suddenly see or the loaves to multiply. Rather, they recognize the possibility of transformation—personal, communal, and even cosmological—as central to the good news. The promise that the future can be something other than what has been prepared and produced by the past is a vital element of Christianity. Sinners can be saved; the oppressed can be liberated; cycles of abuse can be stopped; swords can be beaten into plowshares. All of this happens by the grace of a God whose power is not bounded by the linear unfolding of past into present into future.

To these insightful students, I offer another reminder about the limits of the theological work of the doctrine of creation. Christian theology does not speak of God only as Creator. Were every drop of theological wisdom to be wrung completely out of this doctrine, such that we knew everything we could of God the Creator, we still would not know the fullness of God. God is also Jesus Christ and Holy Spirit. Christian assertions that God is triune demand that we describe God in three different ways. If we ask the doctrine of creation to account for all of who God is, we inadvertently diminish the importance of Jesus and the Spirit, imagining that the truth of God could be told without mentioning them.

I think my students are right. Understanding God as creating through evolution does neglect the redemptive and transformative powers of the Divine. However, we cannot end the conversation about God with creation. We must also speak of Jesus the Redeemer and of the transformative Spirit of God.

“The Why Chromosome”: Genesis 1

Shawnthea Monroe

In our local newspaper, a fiery debate is taking place in the letters to the editor. What is generating so much heat? Not property taxes or zoning laws. Not local economic development and not even war. No, the issue that has pitted neighbor against neighbor is creation—or rather, *creationism*.

A topic that generates this much passion ought to be addressed from the pulpit, I suppose, but I can't work up much enthusiasm for it. Why? I know who's in front of me. This congregation is full of smart, educated, and well-read people. Yes, we are people of faith who believe in God and who follow Jesus Christ, but we are also people who have been to school. We have studied biology and chemistry, and we are grounded in the scientific method, relying on what is provable and testable and measurable. Ask anyone here how the world was made, and we immediately think in scientific terms. We might talk about the big bang or Darwin's theory of evolution, or perhaps quote Stephen Hawking or Albert Einstein. The creationists love to quote the Bible, especially Genesis, but I doubt that anyone here would begin discussing creation by quoting Genesis. We're just not that kind of people.

In fact, when we hear that in 1999, the state of Kentucky outlawed the use of the word *evolution* in its science textbooks, we wince and wonder, “What is the world coming to?” And when we read about school boards requiring that creationism or intelligent design be taught along with evolution, as if they were equally valid scientific theories, we shake our heads at the irrationality of it all. What can you say to people who want to treat their naive readings of the Bible as if they were laboratory evidence? What can you do with people who are so . . . unreasonable?

So, no matter how hot the topic may be in the local papers, when the subject of creation or creationism comes up, I quickly lose interest in the conversation or try to change the subject. This seems to me like someone else’s fight. Even though I am a pastor and view everything from the perspective of faith, I still have a rational mind and a deep respect for the merits of scientific thinking. Who wants to be baited into discussing intelligent design or creationism? Leave those conversations to the folks who handle snakes.

However, while I may not be interested in creationism, the problem with closing my ears and mind to the debate is that, in the name of being educated and rational, I may come dangerously close to banning faith talk altogether when it comes to thinking about the creation. If I did that, it would be a sign that I had allowed my own thinking to fall into the same trap as that of the creationists. I would be treating the theological idea of creation and the biological idea of evolution as two scientific theories that operate on the same plane and compete with each other. You have to choose one or the other. But are they really in competition? The creationists say they are, and the hard-core rationalists say they are. But maybe they are just different answers to the same question.

For example, if someone asks, “Why is the water boiling?” a scientist would say that if you heat water to a certain temperature,

it will begin to change from a liquid state to a gaseous state, forming bubbles that rise up and dissipate into the air; hence the water boils. Stop by the church and ask the same question, “Why is the water boiling?” and I would say, “Because I want a cup of tea.” Both answers are correct: one, the scientific explanation of how water boils; the other, a more human explanation of why I put the kettle on. Not every question about why the water is boiling should be answered by scientists.

In the same way, the view that God wisely created you and me and all humanity and the theory that human life evolved as a process of nature from less complex forms are not competing claims. Perhaps they are simply different answers to the question, “How did we get here?” When I look at it this way, I begin to think that even those people who champion the teaching of creationism may have a valid point because they are protesting against the steady erosion of our most deeply held values about the world and our place in it. These values are being neglected in the public sphere, and it’s high time people of faith woke up to the peril.

Or perhaps these aren’t different answers to the same questions—maybe the questions are different. If you listen to the first chapter of Genesis, there is no mistaking this for a science textbook. It’s poetic and powerful, a wild and wonderful story, full of lush images that draw us in. It’s a story that builds and builds and builds until even the voice of God is caught up in the excitement and God exclaims, “This is not just good! This is *exceedingly* good!” I don’t think Genesis was ever meant to answer the question of *how* we got here. No. Genesis is answering the more important question of *why* we are here.

I’m reminded of the story of the little boy who asks his mother where he came from. Though his mother thinks it’s a little early for this talk, she takes a deep breath and then offers a careful explanation of human sexual reproduction, even touching on issues of

Christian marriage and human love. When she finishes, her son stares at her for a moment and then says, “Well, I was just wondering, because Michael said he’s from Detroit.” Before we answer, we need to understand the question.

So if we want to know about the division of cells or the means of natural selection, a good book on the theory of evolution is what we need. But if we want to understand what it means that we are here, what it means to be human, what value we should place on this planet, and what responsibilities are ours toward it, those are different questions, and a biology textbook will be silent toward them. To inquire into these questions, our best resource is the doctrine of creation, and to understand this doctrine is the beginning of sound faith. If we understand the deep meanings of the claim that God created the heavens and the earth and all that is in them, we can begin to see who we are and where we are and our role as stewards, called to care for God’s good creation. It gives us something to hold on to when we face bigger questions.

In our culture, we have come a long way in answering the question of “how.” From genetics to biology to astronomy, we are discovering more and more about the world and how we got here. But the question I think we have avoided is “Why?” Why are we here? That’s where Genesis begins to make sense.

Why are we here? That’s the question at the heart of every creation story—and there are many. Every culture has developed its own narrative answer to the question of why, from the Epic of Gilgamesh to the Roman myth of Romulus and Remus to the tales of Wakatanka. Every great culture has a story of “in the beginning.” What most of these stories have in common is that they are violent and gory, tales of destruction and chaos out of which gods and humans emerge.

But not our story. Our story is not about violence or destruction or even sex. Our story is about thought and word, spirit and

love, creation and blessing. This is a story of creation in which there are no accidents. The Creator wills everything into being, and every created thing is seen fully by God, who says, “This is good. This is good. This is exceedingly good.” And at the very apex of God’s creative project, we arrive, bearing the image of the one who breathed life into us.

So why are we here? There are many faithful answers to this question, but I think Genesis hints at a powerful one. Picture it: God was creating out of void and nothingness, speaking into being the stars and sun, sea and sky, and everything was good. Then God stopped speaking, entered into this creation, getting down and dirty, laid hands on the newly formed soil, and made humankind. With the first holy breath of life, we became the ultimate hybrid, born of matter and spirit, ground and glory. Yes, we are one of the creatures, but we come bearing the image of God.

Maybe that’s why we are here. We were created to be in a conscious relationship with the living God and the living world. Perhaps God wanted someone to work with, someone who could participate in this holy and good project.

Yet if we take this role as “cocreators” seriously, there is good news and bad news. The good news is that we are good. That’s one of the hardest concepts for people to accept these days, that we are actually good. During the week, part of my ministry is a ministry of presence. People knock on my door seeking a place to set down their burdens. They’re disappointed, they’re hurt, they’re lost, they’ve made serious mistakes, sinning against God and against the ones they love. But what they all have in common is that down deep, they don’t believe they are good. They all believe that somehow what they’ve done or who they are has made them unworthy and undeserving of the love and respect of family and friends and coworkers. And they certainly don’t deserve the love of God.

So I turn to Genesis and assure them, as I assure you, as I assure myself, that created by God, we are good. Full stop. Whatever else may happen, however we use our gifts, however we choose to behave—or misbehave—we are good. And nothing and no one can take that away from us, for it has been determined and declared by the Lord. We are good, and we've been blessed.

The bad news is that we may be good, but we're also responsible. We are responsible. Yes, we are good and have a blessing within us, but we must take responsibility for ourselves—for what we do and for how we act in this world.

In Genesis when God set humankind in the world and said, "I give you dominion over all this," it wasn't *carte blanche* to use creation to fulfill our own selfish desires or to live without any regard for what happens to the rest of the world. No, God was saying, "I trust you enough to make you responsible."

We're responsible, not just for ourselves, but for the whole of creation. (And I thought taking care of pets was tough!) We have a creation to watch over, and so far we're not doing very well. Time doesn't permit me to list all the troubling signs in nature that indicate our global environment is under stress. We know about global warming, we know about the growing hole in the ozone, we know the storm systems are changing and becoming more powerful and violent. Things are changing, and not for the better. I find it all depressing and overwhelming; it makes me want to hide under the bed in my air-conditioned house.

But we can't hide. Because we are part of creation and God has called us to be not just creatures but stewards, this is news that should not just pass through us or by us—this is news *for* us. As Christians, we need a vibrant and robust understanding of creation so we can get some traction on these critical issues. Much will have to change, not just for our children, but starting with us—right here, right now. We will have to change the way we work, the way

we play, the way we live. These choices are beyond our capacity for sacrifice if we continue to believe environmental issues are simply issues of science. They aren't—they are issues of faith.

Genesis is a story of love and relationship, a story that tells us that we are here because God decided to put us here, that God loves us and has judged us good, and that God expects us to be responsible for this beautiful creation in which we find ourselves. As we face the growing crisis of the changing global environment and deal with the hard choices that have to be made, there is one more piece of news: We are not alone. God didn't breathe life into humankind and say, "Good luck! I'll see you at the end!" No. God is with us, still speaking, still acting, still present.

This news is somewhat mixed, isn't it? It's like a friend of mine whose son went through a terrible adolescence. He was always getting into trouble, always testing the limits, making bad choices. All his mother could do was hold him accountable and wait for him to wise up. She enforced every rule and made good on all the consequences, which made her son furious. In the middle of one particularly bad time in his life, he shouted, "I won't play by your rules! I don't love you! Why don't you just leave me alone?" She looked at her son and said, "Honey, I have good news and I have bad news. The good news is that I love you and I'm sticking around. The bad news is . . . I love you and I'm sticking around." And so is God.

God is still here, still holding us accountable to that original blessing and responsibility, assuring us that we are loved, that we are good, but we have work to do.