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THE CANONICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE DOCTRINE OF GOD THE CREATOR¹

I

THE canonical evidence for the doctrine of God the Creator is primarily evidence of the relation of men to God. It is only secondarily evidence about creation. The emphasis is on God, and on what God has done for men.

If this evidence were scientific, or metaphysical, or cosmological, we should be interested in it only as the expression in these spheres of ancient writers whose thoughts have to be compared with those of other and later writers. But while comparison is not ruled out, the point of the biblical evidence lies in the stress it lays on the direct relation of the living God with mankind. This relation is one of faith. It is not a relation evolved from scientific or other spectatorial enquiry, from "proofs" from history, or from satisfying "Weltanschauungen". The biblical writers are not interested either in proving the existence of a Creator or in pointing to texts which might establish an intellectual understanding of Creation; they are interested primarily in the *fact* of the Creator.

The first paragraphs of the book of Genesis bring this clearly before us. We have in Genesis no attempt to elicit the existence of a Creator from the facts of life, nor any interest in the geological or other scientific possibility of this existence. Two things are clearly emphasised in the writer's attitude—one, his presupposition that God is, and two, his insight into the fact of the creation. The second arises from the first. The fact that men are, that the earth and the universe are, is directly dependent on the primal fact that *God is*. God is not proved in creation as its Creator, nor elicited from history as its author. But, simply, *God is*. This fact, that is to say, is utterly independent of creation and of history. It is of course true that nothing could be said of this "Is-ness" of God if we were not created, and if we

¹ We do not agree with views at variance with the full Reformed Witness, expressed in this Article.—Ed.

did not live in history. This human presupposition constitutes the problem for a real understanding of the implications of the doctrine. For God is both utterly independent, absolute, the only One, and He is also known by us only in so far as He enters into relation with us. He is both the "wholly Other", but also, equally significant, He is the "wholly Present", He without whom this world and our own lives would be meaningless.—But primarily we learn from Genesis that God is, and this is the sufficient ground for the doctrine of God the Creator.

The manner in which we know of God the Creator is already presupposed in the fact of the "Is-ness" of God. In the Epistle to the Hebrews the explicit statement is made that "it is by faith that we understand that the world was fashioned by the word of God". The words "by faith" bring us to the kernel of the biblical evidence. In brief, the Bible teaches that when we know God as the Initiator of all history and all human movement towards Him, as the Judge, as the Merciful One, as the Gracious One, as Love, and finally as Saviour—only then, when we enter into direct relation with Him as the living God, as *our* God, do we know Him as Creator. We are compelled, therefore, to set aside all arguments from cosmogony or the so-called "design" of the universe. We are compelled to question the order in which Calvin expounds his theme in the "Institutio". We are compelled finally to re-cast the common exegesis in some of the Psalms, where God the Creator is alleged to be known first by His works and wonders—His creation—and only later by His redeeming love.

II

In the first place, Hume's *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* provide refutation of the "argument from design". At most, the approach to God through the wonderful works of the universe may lead us to a remote apprehension of a Creator; but only of a Creator of that which we know as Creation. By this approach, that is to say, we know the Creator through His creation, i.e. we *know of* a being who has ordered the universe—but we do not *know* this being: we suppose his existence!

Calvin does not convince us that his treatment of the theme leads to any more. Book I of the "Institutes" asks us to look on the wonderful "theatre" wherein we are set, and asserts

that we have in us a capacity to acknowledge the existence of a Creator who has made all these things so well.—But all that we actually do infer from the “theatre” of the universe is (if the further metaphor be allowed) a “producer” or manager of the theatre; but we are not an audience come to view a play: we are playing a part that is no part, but is fraught with destiny and with issues of salvation. In short, anything that we may find of order and goodness in the world does not lead to God, but at most to an ordered and a good One—and that is not the kernel of the biblical evidence of God!

The evidence of the Psalms bears out the same argument. Psalm 104 expresses very well the important issue. The first condition of praise of God as almighty, as creator and sustainer of the universe, is faith in the loving God. Only, that is to say, when we know God as Love, as Saviour, do we come to see the creation as His, as ordered by Him for His glory. There is no *proof* in these Psalms¹; the very passion with which this insight into the meaning of creation is proclaimed springs from the prior certainty of communion with God in faith. Only when God is addressed, and that means only when He addresses us (for all the biblical evidence is evidence of *revelation*) may He in some faint, approximate way be expressed. In other words, the Psalms which seem to praise the Creation are really essentially praising the Creator, and they are praising the Creator because He is Saviour.

To say that God the Creator may only be known and in some way spoken of *after* He is known in faith as the Saving One is to say that the doctrine of God the Creator has a specific personal reference. Thus the writer of Psalm 104 does not praise the Lord because He has (in a general way) created the world; but in a definite and real way he praises the Lord who has created *him*, has shown forth His goodness to *him*.

Turn again to Genesis, and consider the significance of its account of creation. “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” would seem to have above all this same specific personal reference. That is to say, we are to understand that we, that I myself, to limit the situation quite drastically but necessarily, have been created. For me there has been a beginning. This is the only real historical beginning, the beginning in which the writer of Genesis takes his stand. My

¹ e.g., further Psa. 19 and 65.

life once was not, and now is; soon it will no more be. And God has created me; this I know only because I know in faith that He is my Saviour. Hence the writer of Genesis is not retailing a myth, but is stating the strictest religious truth: history for him is constituted when he meets God, when the *Thou* addresses him, and makes a *beginning* for him; and creation assumes meaning for him only when he takes his stand in the reality of this beginning, this meeting with the Other.—Here is the ground for the corollary to the doctrine of the Creator, namely, that “*ex nihilo*” God created the world. If we do not assert this we mix the Creator with His creation, we dissipate the reality of the difference, and hence of the relation, between us His creatures and Him the Creator, so that, finally, we make all life into an illusion. The evidence of the Bible is that there is a clear and real difference between God and the world. God is Creator, and everything, *everything else*, is creation.

III

The New Testament revolutionises the doctrine of God the Creator. It does not alter the order and place of the doctrine, the priority of the Saviour over the Creator, or the absoluteness of our dependence as creatures made out of nothing by God’s will. But as Christians we know that this difference between men and God is not an impassable gulf; we know that God has offered us in Christ reconciliation to Himself. Thus the relation between God and men is filled with new meaning by the coming of the Word, so that we may live, truly live—and therefore overcome—the paradox of our true and real independence as creation, and our utter dependence on God.

For we know that Christ is the Last; He is the Saviour; He is the Word spoken, God’s living speech to us; He embodies the fulness of the independence and the dependence, the Creator and the Creature, in one—the Creator humiliated, the Creature exalted: He is the Evangel. Because He is the Last, He is also the First. So Paul writes in Colossians i. 16, that “by him all things were created . . .” for He who stands at the end of the age reaches back also to the first, back to the eternal wisdom of God. To say less than this would empty the Evangel of meaning, and make the Word a lie. In Christ the divine fulness willed to settle without limit, to reconcile in his own person all

in heaven and earth alike (Col. i. 19, 20). Christ, then, is Creator.

The way for this audacious statement of Paul's had, certainly, been in some ways prepared in the Old Testament, even in Genesis, where the Word of God in creating and naming has a "numinous" quality, and above all in the Wisdom literature, in such a passage as Proverbs viii. 22ff. But the tentative philosophical statements of these passages, elaborated by Philo so that he could say, God is $\upsilon\phi\ \omicron\delta$, matter is $\epsilon\grave{\epsilon}\ \omicron\delta$, and the Word is $\delta\iota\ \omicron\delta$, do not reach the real point of the major Biblical evidence. Christ is certainly mediatorial in His function as the Word, and not simply in the "Einmaligkeit" of the Incarnation but, in virtue of this "once-for-all-ness", also from the beginning with God. But this is a statement of faith, not of the metaphysical order. The fourth Gospel is surely not a metaphysical work; the thought of the Word certainly precedes, in the exposition, the reality of the Incarnate Christ; but the impact of the Christian experience is here, as everywhere, primarily that of a historical experience of a historical figure.

The insight of John, that is to say, as of Paul and the O.T. writers, such as the latter half of Isaiah, is above all a personal insight. It may be elaborated to serve other, less personal, more abstract, or apologetic ends, as Paul used it to combat incipient gnostic heresy in the Epistle to the Colossians, but it remains fundamentally a personal insight into the meaning of creation—i.e. the meaning *for me*. Creation has meaning only when it is known through direct personal relation between God the Creator and myself the creature. That is really to say, creation has meaning only when we meet God; and we meet God as Him who saves. We mishandle the biblical evidence if we attempt to impart into its teaching any of the interpretative, hellenistic ideas of creation, whether ideas of forms, or of an endless process or evolution, or of an impersonal cause or immanent purpose or "élan vital", or the like: we learn from the Bible only the one thing, that by responsible response to the Word spoken to us we may assume historical significance. We may meet the Creator, we may actually, for the first time, become truly His creation. The fallacy of supposing that we really know the Creator when we speak at large about any possible *interpretation* of the universe, without relating the subject to the one reality of God's speech to us (as though we

might be saved by a God who has nothing to do with our creation!)—this fallacy, and its repercussions on current thought, have been clearly handled by Dr. Gogarten in “*Ich Glaube an den dreieinigen Gott*”. We follow his line of thought here, but the cogency of it lies in its correspondence with the major evidence of the Bible.

For we know in faith that God has given us freedom, ability to respond to the Word with “*Yes!*” or “*No!*”, that He acknowledges us as His creatures, and at the same time we know that because He has made us, and given us His Word to be with us, and to save us, we have no other life except in Him. So God binds us in His Absoluteness, speaking with the Word who is Creator, and at the same time waits for us to respond, speaking with the word of the creature. So we take our stand in the one Word, the First and the Last, and, these being lived together, we find salvation.

IV

The force of this knowledge of the doctrine as knowledge inseparably bound up with knowledge of the Saviour, brings us clearly and steadily through the mystery which awaits us in our living situation. So we are able to say, with Isaiah, that God ‘is the Lord, and there is none else . . . I form the light, and create darkness; I make peace, and create evil; I am the Lord, that doeth all these things’. The questionings of Job have already their answer, before ever pain and evil and death strike home. The questions that in a metaphysical order have no answer, questions that remain. Did God create evil as well as good? Did the God whose Word is Christ our Saviour make us as we are? Did the Saviour make all things? Do we need to believe that Creation has any real part to play in the story of salvation?—these questions can only be properly asked when we already know, in the only way that matters, that the God whom we meet in Christ we meet at the same time in our creatureliness, in creation, as the Creator. We *meet* the Creator, we know Him as both beginning and sustaining us as we are. In this meeting in faith there is no logical sequence, but a blinding simultaneity of the Love and the Almightyness of God, of the Holy unapproachable One approaching. Creation is thus, for us, history, and nothing more; and history is the mysterious

approach of the Creator, the absolutely other One, to His creation.—The Manichæan heresy was an attempt to save God's good name, but its consequence was to limit the Saviour and leave us with a salvation which is no salvation, but an ecstasy unrelated to the reality of our creatureliness. The canonical doctrine, on the other hand, binds us to our knowledge of God's Providence, it holds us off from God for good and always, and brings Him also continually near. It holds us firm to our knowledge of the absoluteness of Christ's saving power, which is cosmic, and not fleeting. It shows us clearly our nothingness, God's difference from us, and—because it is known *only* in faith in the Saviour—it shows us the essentially personal, or religious, nature of belief in the Creator. Without salvation, creation is a myth. Without the absoluteness of the Creator, guaranteed for us in the fact of salvation, salvation is a myth. But both are known together, the Absolute meeting us in the Saviour, salvation opening to us the glories of the Creator.

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