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Belief in a Creator God: Its Implications

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This paper discusses the meaning and implications of belief in a creator God – stated in the Nicene Creed as “we believe in one God, the Father almighty, *maker of heaven and earth*, of all things visible and invisible” [emphasis mine].¹ Three broad areas are addressed – *creatio ex nihilo*, *creatio continua*, and the problem of theodicy. In a paper of this length, however, one cannot address all the issues raised.²

Briefly stated, the biblical foundations for belief in a creator God are as follows. In the Old Testament, two main sources for belief in a creator God are found in Genesis, beginning in Genesis 1:1 and Genesis 2:4b.³ Each narrative reflects a different period in Israelite history⁴ – and neither was intended to scientifically answer how the world came to be.⁵ Creation as a theme is also found in the prophets and in the wisdom literature.⁶

¹ Reformed Churches of Australia, *Book of Forms* (Geelong, Australia: Reformed Churches Publishing House, 1991), 11-13. The Apostles' Creed states in its opening words, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth”. The creed (dated no later than the fourth century) was not produced by the apostles themselves, but contains a brief summary of their teachings. The Nicene Creed states, “We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible”. The Nicene Creed, also called the Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed, is a statement of the orthodox faith of the early Christian church in opposition to certain heresies, and was accepted in its present form at the Council of Chalcedon in 451 A.D.

² Neil Ormerod, “Some Observations on the Doctrine of Original Sin”, *Compass* 24 (1990): 42. In relation to this paper, I concur with Neil Ormerod who, in his article, makes a similar comment – “in a paper such as this I cannot hope to address all the issues raised by these difficulties. Such a project would require a thesis rather than a paper”.

³ Anne F. Clifford, “Creation” in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, vol. 1, ed. Francis Schussler and John P. Galvin (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 198. The creation narrative beginning in Genesis 1:1 is an example of the Priestly tradition (sixth-fifth centuries B.C.) while the narrative beginning in Genesis 2:4b is an example of the Yahwist tradition (tenth-ninth centuries B.C.).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 203-205. Passages include Amos 4:13; 5:8; Jeremiah 27:5; 31:35-37; Isaiah 40-55; Proverbs 8; Sirach 24; Wisdom of Solomon 7.

In the New Testament, writes Clifford, “Christ is interpreted to be the embodiment of the creative activity of God”.⁷ Creation theology interprets salvation in Jesus as closely linked with creation.⁸

Doctrine of Creation and *creatio ex nihilo*

From the creedal statement emerges the doctrine of creation which expresses the belief that God is the origin, ground, and goal of the universe and of everything in it.⁹ Implied in the creation doctrine is that creation by God is *ex nihilo* – a statement, notes Clifford, that “articulates faith in the transcendence of God and in the agency of God in creation.”¹⁰

An implication of *creatio ex nihilo* is that it argues against the Platonic teaching of the coeternity of God *and* matter.¹¹ This in turn has led to rejecting three other ideas – first, pantheism whereby God and matter are coeternal and thus the same; second, naturalism that is contrary to God’s agency in creation as freely chosen; and third, dualism contrasting a spiritual, invisible world with material reality.¹²

Based on *creatio ex nihilo*, an understanding of the creator God may be suggested using Aquinas’ adaptation of the Platonic schema of emanation.¹³ God is understood as the sheer act of existence itself – and this is what distinguishes God’s being from all other beings

⁷ Ibid., 208.

⁸ Ibid., 209. Clifford writes that “salvation is looked upon as a renewal of the original creation through the saving presence of God in Jesus” Scriptural support is given through 1 Cor 15:45-49; 2 Cor 5:17; and Rom 8:18-23.

⁹ Ibid., 195. Clifford in her statement states that God is the origin of the *world* – in this paper I have broadened this to include the universe.

¹⁰ Ibid., 210. Clifford adds that creation by God as *ex nihilo* is not explicit in the biblical creation texts themselves. However, it is suggested in 2 Maccabees 7:28, in Romans 4:17, and in Hebrews 11:3.

¹¹ Ibid., 211.

¹² Ibid., 211-212.

¹³ Ibid., 216-217.

that God causes to exist.¹⁴ The Sacred Word reveals that God is spirit (Jn 4:24)¹⁵ and is omnipresent (Ps 139:7-12). In causing creation to exist, it could be argued that spirit (or energy) becomes form, since matter and energy are interchangeable. As a result, God exists in everything.¹⁶ However, Clifford summarizes the distinction between God and creation:

God *is* being, but all created things only *have* being. And they have being as a participation in what God is fully and perfectly . . . Reality is called forth by God where previously there was a void. *Creation is the emanation of all being from a universal cause.* God causes all being without exception and accordingly creates out of nothing [emphasis mine].¹⁷

One can therefore suggest that *panentheism* holds merit in understanding creation – that is, God permeates the universe and all things exist in him. In this way, both God’s transcendence and immanence are upheld. This contrasts with pantheism which states that we are all part of God and that everything that exists has God in it – and which denies God’s transcendence. In summary, Aaron in his book, *The Secret Life of God*, states man’s position in the creation as follows:

. . . you are a soul, a spark of Himself. You are not God, but you are a spark of God. Although God is beyond you, an aspect of God is manifest within you . . . God, who is loving and caring, created you and me in this world as a vehicle for the expression of the full possibility of Himself.¹⁸

In other words, this view of panentheism still distinguishes the created order from its Creator. As such, it is incompatible with process theology which does not see God as

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 217-218.

¹⁵ *The NIV Study Bible: New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: The Zondervan Corporation, 1985), 2032.

¹⁶ Clifford, “Creation”, 218.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ David Aaron, *The Secret Life of God: Discovering the Divine within You* (London: Shambhala Publications, 2004), 29.

before all creation, but *with* all of the created order.¹⁹ Finally, as Polkinghorne states, the divine will alone is the source of created being which upholds creation *ex nihilo*.²⁰

The Nature of Time and *creatio continua*

From the understanding of *creatio ex nihilo*, an implication arises as to the nature of time. Augustine argued that time is part of God's created order and is the condition under which all of creation exists.²¹ The Creator, therefore, exists outside of time and is not governed by time.²²

An inference related to the nature of time involves Augustine's belief that God continues to sustain all things. This occurs through *creatio continua* by God who thus continues to sustain the creation.²³ In other words, as Polkinghorne states, *creatio continua* "affirms a continuing creative interaction of God with the world he holds in being."²⁴ Creation *ex nihilo* and *creatio continua* are the transcendent and the immanent aspects of divine creativity.²⁵

¹⁹ John Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 74.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 73-74.

²¹ Clifford, "Creation", 215.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist*, 75. Polkinghorne suggests that the idea of *creatio continua* can be inferred by a passage written by the prophet we call Second Isaiah: "You have heard these things; look at them all. Will you not admit them? "From now on I will tell you of new things, of hidden things unknown to you. They are created now, and not long ago; you have not heard of them before today. So you cannot say, 'Yes, I knew of them'" (Isaiah 48:6-7, *The NIV Study Bible*, 1385).

²⁵ Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist*, 75.

Moreover, through Augustine’s reflections on the Creator and time, he argues that the Genesis 1-3 creation account could not be taken as literal history involving solar days.²⁶

Clifford writes:

The Genesis creation texts were not composed to answer the scientific question of how the world came to be. On the contrary, they proclaim the relationship of God to reality, a relation of creator to creation. The people for whom these texts were written did not base their views of the universe on the critical use of empirical data. Rather their thinking was imaginative and their expressions of thought concrete, pictorial, and poetic.²⁷

Heaven and Earth

The understanding of *creatio continua* is connected with a concept behind the phrase in the creed, “heaven and earth”.²⁸ Polkinghorne observes that “the heaven referred to cannot properly be the place of our eschatological destiny, for that is the ‘new heaven and the new earth’ (Rev 21:1).”²⁹ Rather, heaven is “a concept of symbolic richness”³⁰ as Polkinghorne articulates:

Heaven is the outward completion of earth, in the direction of the open and the unknown. A world without heaven would be a world without the possibility of transcendence . . . [this] is entirely consistent with our picture of the flexible openness of process being the locus of God’s interaction with his creation, without there being an improper bridging of the ontological gap between the Creator and that creation.³¹

²⁶ Clifford, “Creation”, 216.

²⁷ Ibid., 198.

²⁸ Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist*, 81.

²⁹ Ibid., 80. Revelation 21:1 states: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea” (*The NIV Study Bible*, 2457).

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 81.

In the words of Moltmann, “we call the determined side of this system ‘earth’, the undetermined side ‘heaven’.”³²

Creation and Revelation

Finally, a further implication of the credal statement may be expressed as: Given there is a creator God, creation becomes the primary ongoing source of revelation for what Christians profess to believe about God – that is, “creation itself is the self-revelation of God”.³³

The Problem of Theodicy

Implied in the credal statement is that the creator God is good, and that the universe in its most basic nature is friendly and good to mankind and other forms of life.³⁴ The creation narrative in the Priestly tradition states that “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Gen 1:31).³⁵ A creation that is beneficent to its inhabitants is a reflection of a benevolent creator God.

Nevertheless, a question and an implication arise: If God is good and all-powerful, why does evil and pain exist in the universe? Knight writes that people “observe a beautiful

³² Ibid., 80.

³³ Clifford, “Creation”, 195-196. Romans 1:19-20 states: “What may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse” (*The NIV Study Bible*, 2165). Also, the Book of the Wisdom of Solomon states in chapter 13, verse 5: “For from the greatness and beauty of created things comes a corresponding perception of their Creator” *Holy Bible with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard Version*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1989), 75.

³⁴ George R. Knight, *Philosophy and Education: An Introduction in Christian Perspective*, 2d ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1989), 155.

³⁵ *The NIV Study Bible*, 10.

creation that appears to be made for life and happiness, but is filled with animosity, deterioration, and killing.³⁶ Pain and death exist in the midst of orderliness and life.³⁷ This is the challenge of theodicy – the question about evil, suffering, and guilt in God’s good creation. Moreover, one cannot avoid the question of God itself in theodicy. Two classical arguments have been used to answer this implication with its age-old question.

Theodicy of Free Will

The first argument is the theodicy of *free will*. God created a world of unspoiled harmony, beauty, and order at the beginning of time.³⁸ Evil is introduced by the *free acts* of spiritual beings whom God created – and so evil is the disorder that infects the entire universe.³⁹

The bad angels, and the first human couple, misused the gift of freedom bestowed upon them by God.⁴⁰ This theodicy of free will is often traced back to the theology of Augustine of Hippo.⁴¹ Even though the evolutionary theory has impacted this understanding, the belief that evil has its source in man’s free deviation from God’s will (a deviation for which man alone is responsible) still influences many theologians.⁴²

The theodicy of free will has its own implications. For example, Augustine does not offer a good reason why some angels cleaved to the good and others did not – especially if all were initially created in the same state of perfection and happiness.⁴³ Eventually,

³⁶ Knight, *Philosophy and Education*, 158.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Michael Galligan, *God and Evil* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), 18.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 22.

Augustine was forced to abandon the theodicy of free will as a suitable response of Christian faith to the explanation of evil.⁴⁴

Theodicy of Development

The second argument is the theodicy of *development*. God does not create the world all at once, rather he does so over a long period of time.⁴⁵ Galligan writes that “his creative work will be complete only when time ends and an eternal state of intimate communion between men and God is permanently established”.⁴⁶ Evil arises due to the incomplete character of the creation as it evolves.⁴⁷

The way of justifying God’s goodness and power in view of evil is to describe its beneficial role in leading to salvation and how its pain and suffering is diminished by the glorious final outcome.⁴⁸ Galligan asserts that “God ordains evil as well as the good but never independently of the good”, and evil serves the good.⁴⁹ The logic behind this paradox is *developmental* – man must grow into God-consciousness.⁵⁰ Polkinghorne concurs with this view when he suggests that the world’s suffering is “a necessary contribution to some greater good which could only be realized in this mysterious way.”⁵¹ However, he also cautions of the inadequacy of a simple “pie in the sky” theodicy, whereby the suffering on earth is compensated by the prospective joy of heaven.⁵²

⁴⁴ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 18.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 27.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 28.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist*, 83.

⁵² Ibid., 85.

In sum, evil is not only permitted, but indeed ordained, by God – and it is the consciousness of sin that serves in the development of the consciousness of God.⁵³

Critique of the Two Classical Theodicies

In the final analysis, both the theodicy of free will and theodicy of development have logical difficulties and ambiguities – despite the profundity of their insights and their usefulness in understanding freedom, human initiative, and cosmic development.⁵⁴

Galligan concludes that “they seem only to move the problem back one step further or to obscure deeper issues at stake.”⁵⁵

The Question of Suffering Originating from God

Metz addresses the implications involved in theodicy based on Augustine’s view.⁵⁶

To begin with, Metz suggests that “Augustine laid the burdens of the cause of, and responsibility for, the evil and suffering in the world on humanity,” rooted in mankind’s rejection of God.⁵⁷ As a result, God is ruled out of the theodicy question.⁵⁸ Even in view of the horrendous history of the world’s suffering, there is no questioning of God.⁵⁹

⁵³ Galligan, *God and Evil*, 29.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 35-37.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁵⁶ Johann Baptist Metz, “Suffering from God: Theology as Theodicy”, *Pacifica* 5:3 (1992): 274. Metz is essentially asking whether or not Christian theology has avoided questions about suffering that appears to originate with God.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 278.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

In sum, it is humanity alone which has become sinful – and which must bear the burden of responsibility for a creation weighed down by suffering.⁶⁰

The implications of Augustine’s paradigm for theodicy are significant. First, since such theology allows no enquiry of God in relation to humanity’s suffering, making humans alone responsible, the theodicy question contributed to modern atheism.⁶¹ Second, the excessive preoccupation with mankind’s guilt has led to counter-reactions: freedom increasingly avoiding guilt; the post-modern love of myth in Christianity; and contemporary re-mythologising of the good news involving assumptions of an innocent humanity.⁶²

Metz shows that Augustine’s doctrine of human freedom arose from an apologetic intention: apology for the creator God.⁶³ However, one implication of his theodicy-paradigm is a fundamental weakness. His premise that God may not be drawn into the question contradicts the doctrine of freedom.⁶⁴ Human freedom according to Augustine (and Paul to whom he continually appeals) is not simply *autonomous* but *theonomous*.⁶⁵ In other words, it is made possible by God and encompassed by God.⁶⁶ Therefore, human freedom cannot be totally responsible for the long history of suffering in the world.⁶⁷ In sum, as Metz writes, “the responsibility falls, to some degree, back upon God and God’s predetermining sovereignty.”⁶⁸

⁶⁰ Ibid., 278-279.

⁶¹ Ibid., 280.

⁶² Ibid., 281.

⁶³ Ibid., 279.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

Alternate Views of Dealing with Theodicy

While the problem of theodicy remains a challenge to comprehend, the following four perspectives are insightful.

First, Metz offers an Israelite-biblical paradigm to yield insight into dealing with the question of theodicy. Israel's faithfulness to God expressed itself in a "poverty of spirit".⁶⁹ Its faith did not so much achieve an answer to the suffering it experienced, but it expressed itself above all as a questioning from out of suffering – as an unremitting enquiry of God.⁷⁰ This poverty in spirit can be characterized as a *mysticism of suffering* from God.⁷¹ It is encountered in the prayer traditions of Israel – in the Psalms, in Job, in Lamentations, and in passages of the books of the prophets.⁷² In sum, with the words of Metz, "Christian mysticism needs to be understood as a mysticism of suffering that comes from God"⁷³ and one may also conclude that "theology is, and remains, theodicy."⁷⁴

Secondly, in accepting the question of theodicy as seemingly unanswerable, a degree of consolation occurs through understanding the immanence of God in creation. Since the God of creation is trinitarian in nature, then the Spirit can be seen as the life-giving origin and also immanent in creation.⁷⁵ Drawing on the theology of Jürgen Moltmann, Clifford writes:

Through the Spirit, God participates in the destiny of creation. Through the Spirit, God suffers with the sufferings of creatures. In the Spirit, God experiences their

⁶⁹ Ibid., 283.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid., 284.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., 285.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 287.

⁷⁵ Clifford, "Creation", 244.

annihilation and sighs with the enslaved creation for redemption and liberty. The Spirit is capable of suffering with creation, for in the Spirit is the power of the love from which creation has issued and through which it is sustained.⁷⁶

Thirdly, the problem of theodicy may also be understood in part through the proposition that while God interacts with the world, he is *not* in total control of all its process.⁷⁷

Arising from the logic of love, requiring the freedom of the beloved, there is a consequent kenosis (self-limitation or curtailment of divine power) of God's omnipotence and omniscience.⁷⁸ Polkinghorne describes this view of God's relationship to his creation, which is contentious for some, as follows:

God's *acquiescent* will is part of every event, for if he did not hold the world in being there would be no such event at all, but his *purposive* will is not fulfilled in everything that happens. God remains omnipotent in the sense that he can do whatever he wills, but it is not in accordance with his will and nature to insist on total control [emphasis mine].⁷⁹

Finally, while the problem of evil is perhaps the most perplexing difficulty to confront a religious believer,⁸⁰ the Christian response presents a unique view in the cross of Christ. The cross is "seen as a divine participation in the brokenness and pain of the created order."⁸¹ Through the cross, one comes to understand God's refusal to overrule human history.⁸² Through the cross, one can recognize God's providence is his wisdom.⁸³

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist*, 81.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 85.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

The Problem of Evil and Original Sin

A significant implication resulting from the question of theodicy is the problem of evil itself. Morrow, in his *Time* magazine essay entitled “Evil”, addresses many of the problems relating to evil – such as the problems about its origin, nature, persistence, purpose, and avoidability.⁸⁴ Geisler divides the problems of evil into three realms: moral, metaphysical, and physical.⁸⁵

Implied in the problem of evil is the question of what has been termed “original sin”. Both Ormerod⁸⁶ and Duffy⁸⁷ show that the Adam story does not provide a satisfactory rational explanation of the origin of sin or evil. This was not the intention of the original Genesis account. Duffy offers explanations how the symbol of original sin may be reconstructed by drawing on philosophical, psychological, sociological, and theological perspectives.⁸⁸ As far as the nature of sin, Kelly shows sin to be individual and personal, as well as social and collective.⁸⁹ In sum, while the Adamic myth⁹⁰ alludes to the universal human predicament of good versus evil, the origin of sin remains a mystery and is tied in with the problem of evil.

⁸⁴ Lance Morrow, “Evil”, *Time Magazine*, 10 June 1991, 46-51.

⁸⁵ Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 219.

⁸⁶ Neil Ormerod, “Some Observations on the Doctrine of Original Sin”, *Compass* 24 (1990): 41-45.

⁸⁷ Stephen Duffy, “Our Hearts of Darkness: Original Sin Revisited”, *Theological Studies* 49 (1988): 597-622.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 609-622.

⁸⁹ Kevin Kelly, “The Changing Paradigms of Sin”, *New Blackfriars* 70:832 (1989): 489-497.

⁹⁰ Ormerod, “Some Observations on the Doctrine of Original Sin”, 44. Ormerod states that “with the early texts of Genesis, Chapters 1-11, it is common to apply the literary form of myth, so that it is clear that we are not dealing with historical material.”

To conclude, this paper has addressed three significant overall implications associated with a belief in a creator God. These are *creatio ex nihilo*, *creatio continua*, and the problem of theodicy. Questions surrounding the nature of *creatio ex nihilo*, the origin of evil, and the problem of theodicy will remain enshrouded in mystery until ultimately “He reveals the deep things of darkness”,⁹¹ that is, until God “brings deep darkness to light” (Job 12:22).⁹²

⁹¹ *The NIV Study Bible*, 950.

⁹² *New Revised Standard Version*, 628.

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