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# Creation Theology: A Journey<sup>1</sup>

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Like most of you, I grew up in a tradition that focused all of its attention on the twin themes of sin and redemption. We were, as we said in our liturgy every Sunday, created “sinful and unclean”. But all was not lost since “Christ had redeemed us” from “sin, death and the power of the devil”. It was this “Good News” which I was urged to receive in faith. This message has characterized my Christian experience through most of my life.

But already as a summer supply preacher in Lutheran churches in Minnesota and North Dakota in the early 1960s, I began to express my dissent from certain aspects of that tradition by adding the word “fallen” to the description of our nature. Then while studying theology at Harvard Divinity School I began to realize that the Christian faith was, formally, more than the theme of redemption—as vitally critical as it was and is. I think it was my encounter with the Orthodox criticism of Augustine that I first learned that the first thing to be said of humanity is that we are created in God’s image. And then to realize that our humanity unfolds, even our fallen humanity, within the context of a creation that God looked upon and said, “It was good.”

When I was finishing my doctoral studies at St. Michael’s, the Catholic school in the University of Toronto, I began to hear more fully the great Catholic tradition, as well as, through my good friend, Henry vanderGoot, the creation themes of Calvinism. Now after more than 20 years of teaching courses in the history of Christian thought, I have become fully persuaded that the Christian faith is, as I like to put it, a three articulated faith in God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Spirit.

The first article of the Creed we tend to take for granted. It rolls off our tongue with nary a thought. "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth." Where is the controversy here? Today, we might assume it is around the word "Father". But in its origins in the 2nd century, this was not the issue. The first article was probably even more controversial than the second article in this context. The reason was the presence within the Christian community of gnostic Christians, many of whom believed that God was not the creator of heaven and earth. Rather, they believed, the world in which we find ourselves was the creation of a lower god, and it was intended to entrap our spirit in the realm of matter and the flesh. But the view of the early father, Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, was to prevail. Here was his version of the 1st article: "... faith in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, the seas and all that in them is..." As he explained, "... first, one must believe that there is one God, the Father, who made and fashioned everything and brought being out of nothing, and, while holding all things, is alone beyond grasp." But in "all things" is included this world of ours, with humanity [man] in it...<sup>2</sup> This is echoed in the words of Tertullian whose *Regula Fidei* said, "... one God, who is none other than the Creator of the world..."<sup>3</sup>

For Irenaeus, the consequence of this affirmation was crucial. As the Creation of God, this earth, this world, is our home. It is the fitting context for human life as that life of humanity unfolds from the Creation to Consummation. It is good and it is a gift. We need, I believe, to reaffirm that truth in our own time where a sense of this world as some perverse place is too much with us. But we also have a new circumstance that requires our attention.

Now, while Christianity has sought to avoid the belief that would identify the Creator with his Creation, it has also affirmed with the Psalmist that "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof..." (24:1). This creation reflects and embodies the Glory of God. Again, as the Psalmist declares, "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are their words, their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world"

(19:1-2). It is this earth that we live in; it is a world that we share, as St. Francis of Assisi said, with Brother Sun and Sister Moon, with Mother Earth and Sister Water.<sup>4</sup> It is a creation that is, as the 12th century mystic Hildegard of Bingen saw in her vision, enlivened by the Cosmic Christ. "I gleam in the waters and I burn in the sun, moon, and stars. With every breeze as with invisible life that contains everything, I awaken everything to life....And thus I remain hidden in every kind of reality as a fiery power....For I am life."<sup>5</sup> But what has happened to this theology of creation, to this recognition of the cosmos as sacrament?

In the modern world, it has been overwhelmed by a view of the created world which does not regard the world in terms of its intrinsic dignity as creation but instead regards it as "mere stuff". Christian thinking about creation has thus faded into the background as Christian thinkers failed to meet the challenge of "modernity" which believes that the notion of God is "unnecessary", the idea of a Creator a leftover from a more superstitious time. We have become enthralled by the new sciences and technologies of mastery. We too have come to believe that the world can be understood wholly within itself, as the dominant voices of modernity proclaim. And that means, in the modern view, that the Earth is "mere matter" rather than a living cosmos straight from the hand of the Creator.

And even within the Christian world we get confused about creation. We think of it as an event back there, at the beginning. But as Karl Barth proclaimed in our century, it is an ever-present, on-going event within God. Creation is not over, as we should glimpse when we are present to the birth of another child or any life, in the cycle of the seasons, in the wonder of seed that falls into the ground and dies while giving life to abundant foods and fruits, in the wonder of a winter morning like this morning, in the processes of the universe itself giving rise to novae and supernovae all the time.

The reasons why we lost creation in modern Christianity are too many to review here. Partly, there was the dreadful battle with evolutionary theory which rejected purpose in the name of random selection and a competitive struggle of the fittest/the strongest; partly it was being confused about a science that discloses the web of life with a mentality that seeks to dominate

and master life. It is partly our failure to honour our Creator in the manifold things of creation.

Rather, I want just to make a two-sided general point. On the one hand, since the Reformation, we have been overly pre-occupied with Redemption. And, on the other, since the rise of modernity we have been on the defensive in relation to Creation. How do we learn anew to speak of God as Creator, to see anew the glory of God in this remarkable Earth?

This is the task ahead. We are confronted with a profound ecological crisis. We are faced with a terrible crisis because of the denial of the created dignity of the human and natural world. These are not separate issues. They are deeply intertwined with one another. But I can only indicate that and not develop it here.<sup>6</sup>

The first note of a theology of creation is that we begin to speak of the Glory of the Lord of Creation by speaking of the beauty and wonder of Creation itself. In recent decades we have begun to see a reawakening to the beauty and wonder of Creation. We are beginning to see that God is present to us in the wonder and miracle of the Creation, from the marvel of our bodies and minds to the flow of the waters and the dancing of the clouds. Just as we wonder at the birth of a child, we should wonder at the myriad gifts of life and being in all its diversity.

One of the most articulate voices pointing to the need for a renewed theology of creation is Thomas Berry. We need, he says, to "... foster the deep awareness of the sacred presence within each reality of the universe. There is awe and reverence due to the stars in the heavens, the sun, and all heavenly bodies; in the seas and the continents, to all living forms of trees and flowers; to the myriad expressions of life in the sea; to the animals of the forests and birds of the air."<sup>7</sup>

The second note is a recognition of what we have lost and the need to overcome what Berry calls "our technological confinement". We must see what we have lost—and continue to lose as more than 1000 species disappear each year due to our industrialized way of relating to the earth. As we become dominated by "Voltaire's Bastards", we forget that "even the most primitive tribes have a larger vision of the universe, of our place and functioning within it, a vision that extends to celestial regions of space and to interior depths of the human in a manner

far exceeding the parameters of our own world of technological confinement.”<sup>8</sup>

And the third note is to begin to act to protect our glorious earth from those mentalities of mastery that would turn this marvelous Creation into “mere stuff” to be manipulated for profit and power.

There is so much to be said here, but I will short circuit that in order to bring it back to our local context and the situation of Elmira, where the water was contaminated by Uniroyal Chemical Co. The local situation is part of the global crisis we face that has been generated by the modern technologies of mastery that are disfiguring and destroying the ecological fabric of our planet at an alarming rate. The water crisis in Elmira, generated, in this local instance, by the more than half a century of appalling procedures for dealing with waste by Uniroyal Chemical, has been my awakening to the necessity to recover a vital doctrine of Creation. The point is not to bash Uniroyal but to speak for the Creation that we have been given to steward and against a way of relating to the earth that is destructive.<sup>9</sup> The Canagagigue Creek and the Grand River should not be treated as sewers, nor the soil as a dump ground to absorb toxic waste.

We need an awakening to God’s glory in Creation, one that results in (1) wonder, the astonishment of being itself in all its ever-unfolding diversity, from the unfolding of the universe in an endless space and over times we cannot reckon, to the blossoming of the cherry trees and the flowing of the water, to the winds that blow and the worms present in the soil, from the glory of the universe to the wonder of new life again and again. Here, Christians can not only recover their own profound heritage of Creation as the glory of God, but also learn from other traditions which speak, as does this native prayer: “Grandfather, Great Spirit, Today I sat for a short while in the thundering silence of your solitude. And as I sat there I saw with my limited vision, The power and the sacredness and the beauty of your Creation, I give thanks for this new day...”<sup>10</sup> (2) An awakening that leads to respect for the intrinsic dignity of what is given to us in creation—our own bodies and our whole earth; and (3) the ability to live with creation even as it lives with us. We are daily sustained by a creation that precedes us and sustains us, and it is that creation that is not ours

to squander, but is the heritage unto the seventh generation, for ever and ever.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This was first presented at a breakfast meeting of the Woolwich Community Health Centre, St. Jacobs, Ontario, February 7, 1995. It involved staff of the Centre and members of the clergy from the area. My point in these reflections is to explore the theology of creation in order to underscore that our proper relationship to creation is not domination but partnership; not mastery but mutuality; not "stuff" but mystery. I'm grateful to Rev. Clint Rohr and the Centre for the invitation.
- <sup>2</sup> See St. Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. by J.P. Smith, S.J., No. 16 in *Ancient Christian Writers* (New York: Newman Press, 1952) 50ff. Here Irenaeus remarks that "this is the first and foremost article of our faith" (p. 51). See also the selections from Irenaeus in Hugh Kerr (ed.), *Readings in Christian Thought* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966) 27-36. "The rule of truth we hold is, that there is one God Almighty, who made all things by His Word, and fashioned and formed that which has existence out of that which has none... Above Him there is no other God, neither initial principle, nor power, nor pleroma (fullness)" (30-31).
- <sup>3</sup> See the selections from Tertullian in Kerr, *Reading in Christian Thought*, 36-42, especially his "Rule of Faith", 39-40. Origen begins his account of the apostolic teaching with these words, "First, that God is one, who created and set in order all things, and who, when nothing existed, caused the universe to be..." (Kerr, 43).
- <sup>4</sup> See St. Francis, "Canticle to Brother Sun," in *Francis & Clare, The Complete Works*, trans. by R.J. Armstrong & I.C. Brady, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982) 37-39.
- <sup>5</sup> See Hildegard of Bingen, *Book of Divine Works*, M. Fox (ed.) (Santa Fe: Bear & Co., 1987) 8-10.
- <sup>6</sup> This is, however, an essential point. Many fail to see the link between the desecration of the earth and the human. The modern sciences of mastery are equally devastating on the human as humanity itself becomes another "stuff" to be mastered. See the splendid article by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Sacred Science and the Environmental Crisis—An Islamic Perspective," in S.H. Nasr, *The Need for a Sacred Science* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993) 129-147. Nasr remarks that "the person who speaks for the life of the Spirit today cannot remain indifferent to the destruction of that primordial cathedral which is virgin nature nor maintain silence concerning the harm that man does to himself [sic] as an immortal being by absolutizing the 'kingdom of man' and as a consequence brutalizing and destroying everything else in the name of the earthly welfare of members of that kingdom" (144).
- <sup>7</sup> See Thomas Berry, *Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1990) 46. Berry rightly notes that "to restore a sense of the

earth as the matrix of the human, as primary norm of all human values and activities, is a difficult change" (120).

<sup>8</sup> The phrase "Voltaire's Bastards" is from John Ralston Saul, *Voltaire's Bastards, The Dictatorship of Reason in the West* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1992) which chronicles his account of reason gone wrong in the "Enlightenment West". There is much right here, but it is imperative to distinguish the technical reason that Saul rightly excoriates from the "intellectus" or the power of the mind to know God and contemplate the truth of things. See also Berry, *Dream of the Earth*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> In 1989, the past practices of Uniroyal Chemical Company led to the closing of the municipal water supply due to its contamination with NDMA. This then led many of us to the discovery that this was just part of the problem since we learned that the Uniroyal Property is a virtual chemical nightmare. The Minister of the Environment and Energy, Mr. Bud Wildman, has called this "the most polluted site in the province of Ontario". Ever since that time a local environmental group, APT Environment has been insisting on a full containment of the site and an effective remediation process. (Why do women play such a leading role in the recovery of creation and in ecological movements? The APT Environment group was started by four local women and continues to be spearheaded by women. This is not, I believe, either accidental or incidental.) It was this situation and what it has engendered in our community that led Rev. Clint Rohr of the Woolwich Community Health Centre to sponsor the series of meetings entitled "Caring With Creation". I was the first to speak in that series. The efforts to get Uniroyal Chemical to acknowledge their responsibility and to undertake a significant containment and clean-up program have been difficult, to say the least. My efforts to raise these issues with Uniroyal have met with either no response or private annoyance when I speak of "Sister Water" or "Mother Earth".

<sup>10</sup> See Arthur Solomon, *Songs for the People: Teachings on the Natural Way* (Toronto: NC Press Ltd., 1990) 21.