

Is Creation
Good?

St Paul

Since we have that same spirit of ¹⁰ faith, we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you to himself. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

Therefore we do not lose heart. **Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.**

John's Gospel

I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours. All I have is yours, and all you have is mine... **I will remain in the world no longer, but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you.** Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, the name you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one... I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. **My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it.** Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world... My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. **Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.** Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.

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Gnostic Apocryphon of John

Adam was revealed because within him dwelt the shadow of light. His mental abilities were far greater than those of his creators. They had gazed upward and seen his exalted mental capability. The host of rulers and demons plotted together, They mixed fire and earth and water together with four blazing winds and they melded them together in great turbulence. Adam was brought into the shadow of death. They intended to make him anew This time from Earth, Water, Fire, Wind, Which are Matter, Darkness, Desire, The Artificial Spirit. This all became a tomb, a new kind of body. Those thieves bound the man in it, enchained him in forgetfulness, made him subject to dying.

The rulers took the man and put him into paradise They told him to eat freely. Their food is bitter; their beauty is corrupt. Their food is deceit; their trees are ungodliness. Their fruit is poison. Their promise is death.

Plotinus

And indeed if the divine did not exist, the transcendently beautiful, in a beauty beyond all thought, what could be lovelier than the things we see? Certainly no reproach can rightly be brought against this world save only that it is not That. Let us, then, make a mental picture of our universe: each member shall remain what it is, distinctly apart; yet all is to form, as far as possible, a complete unity so that whatever comes into view shall show as if it were the surface of the orb over all, bringing immediately with it the vision, on the one plane, of the sun and of all the stars with earth and sea and all living things as if exhibited upon a transparent globe.

Enneads 2, IX.

Dionysius the Areopagite

“The Good is Cause of the celestial movements in their commencements and terminations, of their not increasing, not diminishing, and completely changeless, course, and of the noiseless movements, if one may so speak, of the vast celestial transit, and of the astral orders, and the beauties and lights, and stabilities, and the progressive swift motion of certain stars, and of the periodical return of the two luminaries, which the Oracles call “great,” from the same to the same quarter, after which our days and nights being marked, and months and years being measured, mark and number and arrange and comprehend the circular movements of time and things temporal. But, what would any one say of the very ray of the sun? For the light is from the Good, and an image of the Goodness, wherefore also the Good is celebrated under the name of Light; as in a portrait the original is manifested. For, as the goodness of the Deity, beyond all, permeates from the highest and most honoured substances even to the lowest, and yet is above all, neither the foremost outstripping its superiority, nor the things below eluding its grasp, but it both enlightens all that are capable, and forms and enlivens, and grasps, and perfects, and is measure of things existing, and age, and number, and order, and grasp, and cause, and end; so, too, the brilliant likeness of the Divine Goodness, this our great sun, wholly bright and ever luminous, as a most distant echo of the Good, both enlightens whatever is capable of participating in it, and possesses the light in the highest degree of purity, unfolding to the visible universe, above and beneath, the splendours of its own rays, and if anything does not participate in them, this is not owing to the inertness or deficiency of its distribution of light, but is owing to the inaptitude for light-reception of the things which do not unfold themselves for the participation of light. No doubt the ray passing over many things in such condition, enlightens the things after them, and there is no visible thing which it does not reach, with the surpassing greatness of its own splendour. Further also, it contributes to the generation of sensible bodies, and moves them to life, and nourishes, and increases, and perfects, and purifies and renews.”

Irenaeus

“There is therefore one God, who by the Word and Wisdom created and arranged all things; but this is the Creator who has granted this world to the human race, and who, as regards His greatness, is indeed unknown to all who have been made by Him (for no man has searched out His height, either among the ancients who have gone to their rest, or any of those who are now alive); but as regards His love, He is always known through Him by whose means He ordained all things. Now this is His Word [Logos], our Lord Jesus Christ, who in the last times was made a man among men, that He might join the end to the beginning, that is, man to God. Wherefore the prophets, receiving the prophetic gift from the same Word, announced His advent according to the flesh, by which the blending and communion of God and man took place according to the good pleasure of the Father, the Word of God foretelling from the beginning that God should be seen by men, and hold converse with them upon earth, should confer with them, and should be present with His own creation, saving it, and becoming capable of being perceived by it, and freeing us from the hands of all that hate us, that is, from every spirit of wickedness; and causing us to serve Him in holiness and righteousness all our days, in order that man, having embraced the Spirit of God, might pass into the glory of the Father.”

Lynn White

“At the level of the common people this worked out in an interesting way. In Antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own genius loci, its guardian spirit. These spirits were accessible to men, but were very unlike men; centaurs, fauns, and mermaids show their ambivalence. Before one cut a tree, ined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and to keep it placated. By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects. It is often said that for animism the Church substituted the cult of saints. True; but the cult of saints is functionally quite different from animism. The saint is not in natural objects; he may have special shrines, but his citizenship is in heaven. Moreover, a saint is entirely a man; he can be approached in human terms. In addition to saints, Christianity of course also had angels and demons inherited from Judaism and perhaps, at one remove, from Zoroastrianism. But these were all as mobile as the saints themselves. The spirits in natural objects, which formerly had protected nature from man, evaporated. Man's effective monopoly on spirit in this world was confirmed, and the old inhibitions to the exploitation of nature crumbled.”

Jurgen Moltmann

“According to its greek derivation, the word ecology means the doctrine of the house. What does the Christian doctrine of creation have to do with a doctrine of the house. If we see only a Creator and his work there is no connection. But if we understand the Creator, his creation and the goal of that creation in a trinitarian sense, then the Creator through his Spirit, dwells in his creation as a whole and in every individual created being by virtue of his spirit holding them together and keeping them in life. The inner secret of creation is this indwelling of God, just as the inner secret of the Sabbath of creation is God's rest. If we ask about creation's goal and future, we ultimately arrive at the transfiguring indwelling of the triune God in his creation, which through that indwelling becomes a new heaven and a new earth and at God's eternal sabbath, in which the whole creation will find bliss. The divine secret of creation is the Shekinah, God's indwelling, and the purpose is to make the whole creation the house of God. If this is the theological side of the ecological doctrine of creation, the anthropological side must correspond to it. Existence can only become a home if the relationship between nature and human beings is without stresses and strains – if it can be described in terms of reconciliation, peace and a viable symbiosis. The indwelling of human beings in the natural system of the earth corresponds, for its part, to the indwelling of the Spirit in the soul and body of the human being, which puts an end to the alienation of human beings from themselves.”

- *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*

Jurgen Moltmann

"An ecological doctrine of creation implies a new kind of thinking about God. The centre of this thinking is no longer the distinction between God and the world. The centre is the recognition of the presence of God *in* the world and the presence of the world *in* God. Because it grew up in an environment moulded by pantheistic, matriarchal, animist religions, the belief in Yahweh to which the Old Testament testifies, laboriously and perseveringly taught *the difference* between God and the world: God is not to be understood in worldly terms, and the world must not be interpreted as divine. God does not manifest himself in the forces and rhythms of nature; he reveals himself in human history, which is determined by his covenant and his promise. This means that the forces of fertility must not be worshipped as divine forces. The fertility cults in Canaan were rejected as 'idolatry', and the transformation of Yahweh into a 'Baal', a divine natural power, was persecuted as the worst form of blasphemy. The basis of the enduring distinction between God in the world was belief in creation, for this set God over against the world. God's context is transcendence, and the world, as 'the work of his hands', is turned into immanence.

Nature is stripped of her divinity, politics become profane, history is divested of fate. The world is turned into passive matter. The distinction between God and the world was also seized on by modern theological apologetics as a way of adapting the biblical traditions to the secularization processes. The ruthless conquest and exploitation of nature which fascinated Europe during this period found its appropriate religious legitimation in that ancient distinction between God and the world. But of course this was a falsification of the critical truth of the Old Testament distinction. It is a truth that must not be surrendered; but an ecological doctrine of creation today must perceive and teach God's immanence in the world. This does not mean departing from the biblical traditions. On the contrary, it means a return to their original truth: through his cosmic Spirit, God the Creator of heaven and earth is present in each of his creatures and in the fellowship of creation which they share. 'Deus penetrat praesentia sua totum universum.' God is not merely the Creator of the world. He is also the Spirit of the universe. Through the powers and potentialities of the Spirit, the Creator indwells the creatures he has made, animates them, holds them in life, and leads them into the future of his kingdom. In this sense the history of creation is the history of the efficacy of the divine Spirit. So even when we consider the original biblical traditions, it is one-sided to view creation only as the work of 'God's hands' and, as his 'work', something that has simply and solely to be distinguished from God himself. Creation is also the differentiated presence of God the Spirit, the presence of the One in the many. If we are to follow the concept of God's transcendence in relation to the world with an understanding of this divine world-immanence, it is advisable to eliminate the concept of causality from the doctrine of creation, and indeed we have to stop thinking in terms of causes at all; for the causality approach allows us to conceive only of the transcendence of the divine *causa prima* which, since it is divine, must also be *causa sui*. But creating the world is something different from causing it.

If the Creator is himself present in his creation by virtue of the Spirit, then his relationship to creation must rather be viewed as an intricate web of unilateral, reciprocal and many-sided relationships. In this network of relationships, 'making', 'preserving', 'maintaining' and 'perfecting' are certainly the great one-sided relationships; but 'indwelling', 'sympathizing', 'participating', 'accompanying', 'enduring', 'delighting' and 'glorifying' are relationships of mutuality which describe a cosmic community of living between God the Spirit and all his created beings. The trinitarian doctrine of creation therefore does not start from an antithesis between God and the world, so that it can then go on to define God and the world over against one another ('God is not worldly and the world is not-divine'). It proceeds differently, starting from an immanent tension in God himself: God creates the world, and at the same time enters into it. He calls it into existence, and at the same time manifests himself through its being. It lives from his creative power, and yet he lives in it. So if God as Creator stands over against his creation, he also stands over against himself. If the creation stands over against its Creator, God again stands over against himself. The God who is transcendent in relation to the world, and the God who is immanent in that world are one and the same God. So in God's creation of the world we can perceive a self-differentiation and a self-identification on God's part. God is in himself, and yet he is at the same time outside himself. He is outside himself in his creation, and is yet at the same time in himself, in his sabbath.

Questions

1. To what extent is John's view of creation gnostic?
2. The beauty of the material world is a pale reflection of God's goodness. Do you agree?
3. What does it mean to say that through Christ all things were made?
4. Is Lynn White's criticism of Christianity fair?
5. How do you interpret the following quotation from Jurgen Moltmann:
 - a. "The divine secret of creation is the Shekinah, God's indwelling, and the purpose is to make the whole creation the house of God."