



CREATION. FALL. REDEMPTION.

Literally nothing is possible without the ordaining, creative power of God.

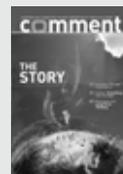
By Al Wolters

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger said that the basic question addressed in metaphysics is “Why is there anything at all, and not rather nothing?” By that definition, he said, the idea of a Christian metaphysics is a “wooden iron,” a contradiction in terms. Why? Because the Christian already knows the answer to the question. We know that there is something rather than nothing because God made the world.

Whatever we may think of Heidegger’s definition of metaphysics, we can agree that he was right about one thing. Fundamental to all Christian thinking is the belief that God created the world, that reality is in some fundamental sense *creation*.

This is an ecumenical Christian confession. But there is probably no Christian tradition in which the teaching concerning creation plays such a pivotal role as in the line that runs from Scripture through Irenaeus, Augustine, Calvin and Kuyper to *Comment*. In this strand of the Christian tradition, creation is conceived of in a particularly comprehensive way, and even salvation is in large measure understood as the retrieval of creation as God originally intended it. Creation is foundational to everything. Moreover, creation is *good* in a deep and primordial sense—so deep,

FROM SPRING
2010 EDITION:
[cardus.ca/
comment/
archives](http://cardus.ca/comment/archives)



in fact, that the goodness of creation continues to manifest itself even in the midst of terrible perversion.

Unlike other understandings of orthodox Christianity, this vein of the tradition does not see redemption as something pitted against creation (as in dialectical theology), or as supplementing and fulfilling it (as in some understandings of Thomism), or as standing alongside it without intrinsic connection (as in various two-realm theories), but rather as renewing and restoring it. Thus creation, embodying God’s intention from the beginning, is the very goal of salvation in Christ. The whole point of redemption is to restore life and the world to the way they were meant to be from the beginning. Salvation means re-creation; grace restores nature.

However, in order for us to understand this properly, we need to have a view of creation which is much more comprehensive and variegated than is common in ordinary Christian usage. The first thing most people think of in connection with creation is the

so-called “natural world”—that is, the physical and biological world. We think of stars and galaxies as well as molecules and atoms, of trees and flowers as well as birds and beasts. But that is a very limited view of creation. In the biblical view, creation is everything which God has ordained to exist, what he has put in place as part of his creative workmanship. To be sure, this includes the great variety of physical entities and processes, and the enormous diversity of flora and fauna that God has created “according to their kind,” but it also encompasses much more. Creation includes such human realities as families and other social institutions, the presence of beauty in the world, the ability to appreciate that beauty, the phenomena of tenderness and laughter, the capacity to conceptualize and reason, the experience of joy and the sense of justice. An almost unimaginable variety of objects, institutions, relationships and phenomena are part of the rich texture of God’s creation.

It is a striking fact that biblical religion is not unique in this. Although there is a sense in which the idea of creation, understood as a contingent and ordered arrangement of reality put in place by a transcendent God, is unique to biblical thought—certainly the Greeks never conceived of such a thing—the general idea of a divinely sanctioned cosmic order which encompasses both the natural world and human life and society is very widespread. It has been pointed out, for example, that the notion of “creation” in the other nations of the ancient Near East (in Mesopotamia and Egypt and surrounding areas) referred primarily to the way human society was arranged. The various “creation myths,” although they did not exclude the physical and biological world, were primarily designed to explain the human world with its culture and society, its institutions like kingship and the priesthood. The work of Richard Clifford on these ancient creation myths is particularly illuminating in this regard.



However, this notion of an all-encompassing divine world order is much more widespread than even the ancient Near East. Virtually all cultures have myths and religions which presuppose such an order, and which relate that order in the first place to the arrangements of human society. Comparative religion and cultural anthropology find this idea of a universal order, into which humanity and all its cultural manifestations fit like a baby in the womb, in virtually all human societies. The great exceptions are the societies shaped by the dominant strain of secular philosophies and ideologies of the West since the European Renaissance. These societies have created a divorce between the natural and human worlds, so that the standards of human life and culture are no longer sought in a given and external order that has divine authority, but rather in the human subject itself, which produces its own order out of its own authority.

All of this is to say that the biblical idea of creation as encompassing much more than the natural world is not very peculiar at all, from a world-historical perspective. What is peculiar about the biblical concept is rather the transcendent and sovereign Creator who makes it all come to pass, and that the Creator makes his handiwork without any pre-existing stuff to work with. Biblical creation is a *creatio ex nihilo*, creation out of “nothing,” which means of course a creation out of not-anything, without any raw materials. God simply spoke and it was.

Consequently, from a broadly cultural and historical point of view, it is not at all surprising that the Bible should include things like the political order, or the institution of marriage, as things created by God, as parts of what he had ordained from the beginning. Nor should we conclude from the biblical texts which mention political order and marriage (I am thinking primarily of Rom 13:1, 1 Pet 2:13, and 1 Tim 4:3-4) that these are the only social institutions or cultural realities that belong to the God-ordained arrangement of things. They are simply incidental illustrations of the general truth assumed throughout Scripture, that literally nothing is possible without the ordaining, creative power of God, which lays down the law to creatures and created relationships and phenomena in all their vast variety.

It is especially the idea of creational law that clarifies the biblical conception of creation. As a sovereign king, God enacts his laws (his decrees, his statutes, his ordinances, his words) for everything that is. Reality is constituted by his creative word of command. Accordingly, everything is creational in the sense that it is both constituted and normed by a divine fiat. This applies as much to a bird’s nest-building instinct as the principles of jurisprudence or logical thinking. Of course, in the case of the typically human dimensions of creation, the norms and patterns which God puts in place also require responsible human implementation, and will thus vary in their outworking in different times and places.

It is difficult—in fact, impossible—to speak of creation as a Christian in abstraction from the two other fundamental categories of the biblical story: sin and salvation. Sin means the distortion of creation, and salvation its recovery in Christ. This means that creation comes back with a vengeance (so to speak) in the redeemed Christian life. It is in the richly textured glory of *created* human life, in which mothers sing lullabies to their babies, and children run for the sheer joy of going fast, that God wants to be glorified by our service and witness to him, so that all the world can see what true created human life is like, despite the scars and scourge of sin and death. That applies to our moviegoing and our moviemaking, to our parties and our philosophizing, to our imagination and our determination.

Creation constitutes the warp and woof of our ordinary lives—and in Christ it is glorious. Individually and communally, we are

to be posters of the kingdom—the reclaimed creation—of Jesus Christ. When the apostle Paul says that the church is the “ground and pillar of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15), he certainly does not mean that we as people of God somehow shore up or sustain the truth of God. Instead, what his image conveys is that we as the people of God are collectively like the walls and posts which bore the graffiti of the ancient world, sending messages to all and sundry who passed by. We are to be the billboards of the gospel in the extraordinary ordinariness of our daily lives—extraordinary because of the renewing power of the Holy Spirit, ordinary because of the common creational stuff of our daily existence. It is in that profoundly this-worldly and mundane sense that creation, to use Calvin’s arresting phrase, is the theatre of God’s glory. 



AL WOLTERS is Professor Emeritus of Religion and Theology/Classical Languages at Redeemer University College. He served as a Senior Member at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto from 1974-1984, received his doctorate in philosophy from the Free University of Amsterdam in 1972, and is the author of *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview*.

**GET \$10 OFF
YOUR SUBSCRIPTION
TO CLAIM YOUR
OFFER GO TO:**

WWW.CARDUS.CA/COMMENT/READER

