

CHAPTER 2

God's Eschatological Creation

CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGIANS often claim that creation is ineluctably connected with eschatology. The reaffirmation, however, of creation's eschatological character is quite recent—occurring, with a few exceptions, within the last twenty years. It has taken some time for the early twentieth-century renewed interest in eschatology to unite with the later-twentieth-century interest in creation theology. Even now, only a handful of theologians have explicitly addressed the connection between God's creation and the Kingdom of God. The work of Ruether, Rasmussen, and Keller was examined in chapter 1 in this regard. Ruether and Keller want to reject certain basic assertions of Christian eschatology, while Rasmussen wants eschatology without christology. In contrast, I argue in this chapter that the created universe is fundamentally eschatological and christological, and that the eschaton is part and parcel of God's creative activity. Neither creation stories nor end-of-the-world stories are unique to Christianity; indeed Brian Swimme has proposed a “common creation story” to inspire interfaith ecological efforts. For Christians, however, the story of creation and consummation are not generic, but narratives of God's activity for, and in, the world through Jesus Christ. Exploring the density and range of the creation-eschatology connection is crucial, therefore, for understanding how God's creating and sustaining presence relates to God's intentions for the material world.

The chapter begins with an assessment of the “common creation story” and several cautions about our discourse regarding nature and creation. It then addresses the doctrine of creation in two sections: first, the activity of God, and second, the results of God's activity. The cumulative

effect of these analyses should be an image of the created universe as a finite, beloved, good-yet-flawed, tremendously varied universe of particular beings, forces, and relationships, all being carried toward their fulfillment in God's purposes.

COMMON CREATION STORY?

✦ Contrary to the claims of Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, there is no universal story of creation. Swimme and others have offered a “common creation story” drawn, in part, from popular versions of contemporary science, in part from biblical elements, and in part from current ecological motifs. So it begins,

Originating power brought forth a universe. All the energy that would ever exist in the entire course of time erupted as a single quantum—a singular gift of existence. If in the future, stars would blaze and lizards would blink in their light, these actions would be powered by the same numinous energy that flared forth at the dawn of time. There was no place in the universe that was separate from the originating power of the universe. Each thing of the universe had its very roots in this realm. Even space-time itself was a tossing, churning, foaming out of the originating reality, instant by instant. Each of the sextillion particles that foamed into existence had its root in this quantum vacuum, this originating reality.¹

The term “common” points to both the universal origin of all things (the big bang) and the universal appeal of such a story to religious and nonreligious alike. Swimme writes,

The creation story unfurling within the scientific enterprise provides the fundamental context, the fundamental arena of meaning, for all the peoples of the Earth. For the first time in human history, we can agree on the basic story of the galaxies, the stars, the planets, minerals, life forms, and human cultures. This story does not diminish the spiritual traditions of the classical or tribal

1. Swimme and Berry, *Universe Story*, 17.

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periods of human history. Rather, the story provides the proper setting for the teachings of all traditions, showing the true magnitude of their central truths.²

The intentions behind this project are benevolent. Berry and Swimme are targeting people who feel caught between science and religion, or who feel alienated from both. They want to provide such people with a positive perspective from which to envision their place in a harmonious universe, and hence to modify their lives in earth-friendly ways. Moreover, Berry and Swimme are aware of the importance of story in human identity: who we are depends on the stories we, and others, tell. While the “common creation story” project utterly fails, its failings are instructive for how Christians should approach the diverse understandings of creation, even within their own tradition.

First, the common creation story is **not universal** even among the experts who supposedly discovered it. While the broad outlines of space history and evolutionary biology are generally accepted among Western scientists, the particular sequence, timeframes, and connection of events are subjects of disagreement and uncertainty.³ Second, to call this version of contemporary science a story that “we can all agree on” immediately begs the question: What “we”? Are we that “we”? It is neither a story that would appeal to many Protestant evangelicals, nor perhaps to conservative Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, nor goddess followers, to name a few million. Even people who would accept it as a sort of scientific creation story might bridle at the notion that it “embraces” their religious faith.⁴ The overlap or consonance of creation stories—like any fundamental narrative—cannot be imposed by colonial decree; rather, it must be discovered in the mutual telling of those stories. Moreover, this “common creation story” is predicated on the abstraction and objectivity

2. Swimme, *Green Dragon*, 38.

3. A recent issue of *Scientific American* (May 2004, vol. 290:5) carried the headline: “The Big Bang May Not Have Been the Beginning.”

4. “The Great Story is a way of telling the history of everyone and everything that honors and embraces all religious traditions and creation stories,” www.thegreatstory.org/what_is.html (accessed February 21, 2005).

of Western scientific language, as if it is somehow arching above all the local stories that it can “embrace.” Scientists (the cytogeneticist Barbara McClintock, for instance), who point out how particular cultural assumptions have governed and shaped Western scientific endeavors, have refuted such objectivity.⁵ Swimme seems to think the universal creation story can merge scientific and religious discourse; what actually occurs, though, is a subordination of religion to science—scarcely a new or desirable phenomenon in Western culture. Furthermore, as Reinhard Hütter points out, the Christian creation story is less about the “nature” of the reality (as Western science sees it) than about “the One who has brought this reality into being and is present in this reality as creative agent.”⁶

UNIVERSAL NATURE?

✦ A universal story of creation is as unlikely as a universal understanding of “nature.” The terms “nature” and the “natural” slip and slide over meanings, depending upon political aims and discursive contexts. Raymond Williams has pointed out that the earliest meaning of “nature” in ancient Greek was probably “the inherent and essential quality of any particular thing.”⁷ This gradually became generalized, in medieval Christian orthodoxy, to mean the nature of all things, the “essential constitution of the world.”⁸ Nature pointed to a greater abstraction, a universal principle around which the world’s innumerable objects and processes could be organized. We still find this usage in statements about the nature’s power of destruction or nature’s tendency toward greater complexity. Most often in environmental discourse, however, “nature” refers to non-human biophysical reality. Nature is the land, sea, air, and outer space; it is the animals, plants, minerals, climate, earthquakes, hurricanes, and dirt. Nature, in this parlance, does not usually refer to human beings, cities, human constructions, ideas, or artistic endeavors. So Western

5. Keller, *Feeling for the Organism*.

6. Hütter, “*Creatio ex nihilo*,” 91.

7. Raymond Williams, *Problems*, 68.

8. *Ibid.*

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environmentalists want to conserve or protect “nature” from the ravages of human beings. Obviously, however, this conception of nature is under constant dispute. Are the Dakota Badlands a United States national park and treasury of prehistoric fossils, or are they the sacred lands of Sioux ancestors? Are the Amazonian forests a wilderness to be protected from human incursion or are they the home of local Indians? Is the patch of ground beside a housing project a valuable bit of nature to be nurtured and gardened, or is it a wasted piece of “real estate?” In all such conflicts, the meaning of nature never stands alone, but stems from complex intersections of history, geography, social location, religion, race, class, and gender. We might ask, “tell me what you see in the land, and I can tell who you are.”

The conflicts over nature, therefore, are not apolitical, but always involve clashes of interest and power.⁹ For instance, the numerous legal battles between the U.S. government and Native American tribes involve different understandings of land, divine presence, and property ownership, as well as sovereignty and territory. In another arena, white feminists of the 1970s sought to reclaim the positive aspects of women’s “connection” with nature—thus highlighting women’s “natural” tendencies toward care, nurture, and creativity. At the same time, however, black women were struggling against longstanding stereotypes of themselves as more “natural”—i.e., beastly, sexual, emotional—than either black men or white people.¹⁰ Any attempt to target nature or the natural must be open to scrutiny of its socio-political presuppositions.

What does all this have to do with Christian theology? “Nature,” after all, in the sense of non-human biophysical reality, is not a specifically theological or biblical category.¹¹ Christians generally speak about “creation” instead. Nevertheless, the histories of Christian attitudes toward God’s creation and secular attitudes toward nature cannot be completely separated. While Christianity is not to “blame” for the current ecological

9. Soper, *What is Nature?*, chapter 1.

10. Thistlethwaite, *Sex, Race, and God*, 58–59.

11 Paulos Mar Gregorios notes that the concept of ‘nature’ in the sense of non-human, self-existent reality does not occur in the New Testament or Old Testament. “New Testament Foundations,” 40.

degradation, Christian doctrines certainly factored in the development of modern science in the sixteenth century, and continue to be wielded as justification for anti-environmental behavior. Moreover, the traffic flows both ways: shifts in Christian doctrine and practices are always located in or against secular events and cultural trends. So it is never as easy as saying, “Whatever non-Christians think, Christians believe that God’s creation is valuable and should be cared for by humans.”

A second reason for Christian theologians to attend to the discourse of “nature” is that “creation,” too, is a concept with political effects. The confession that “God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit created all that is” bears substantive content, as we shall explore further. Its interpretation and implementation, however, inevitably produce differences in understanding, in part because they are subject to all the earthly influences of race, class, history, geography, and other factors. So the medieval bestiaries’ presentation of animals as moral instructors is quite different from the Puritan dread of ungodly wilderness, and both of these differ widely from the characterization of nature in Athanasius’ *Life of Anthony* as a populace of “junior monks” that can be taught Christian obedience.¹² So we need to attend to the specific context of different manifestations of creation doctrine, as well as their effects on local human and non-human communities. As Kate Soper writes, the recurring motif of Eden as a source of purity “has been a component of all forms of racism, tribalism, and national identity.”¹³ Christian dogma is not responsible for current environmental destruction and ecological injustice, but neither can it dispute its involvement in these matters, for dogma arises from, and points toward, human life under God on earth.

About “creation” we must also ask not only “whose creation” and “what Christians,” but also “which part of creation?” Any strong dichotomy between A and B works to magnify the differences between A and B and blur the differences within A and within B. Thus, the modernist dichotomy between humans and nature has perpetuated and masked unjust distribution of natural resources and environmental damage, by

12. Yordy, “Eco-Critical Reading.”

13. Soper, *What is Nature?*, 18.

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abstracting both humans and nonhumans from their particular places and lives. A 1989 special edition of *Scientific American*, entitled “Managing Planet Earth,” said,

It is as a global species that we are transforming the planet. It is only as a global species—pooling our knowledge, coordinating our actions and sharing what the planet has to offer—that we may have any prospect for managing the planet's transformation along the pathways of sustainable development. Self-conscious, intelligent management of the earth is one of the great challenges facing humanity as it approaches the twenty-first century.¹⁴

Here we have the planet as a single, unitary object to be managed by a single, unitary subject—humanity. The enormous, interrelated pluriformity of creatures, plants, soils, minerals, lunches, dwellings, burial rites, gods, tools, and so forth becomes two great abstractions on either side of a divider: nature vs. humans. This perspective masks important realities on both sides of the divide, which itself obscures the deep and intricate interactions between cultures and their environments.

On the one side, “the environment itself is local; nature diversifies to make niches, enmeshing each locale in its own intricate web.”¹⁵ A tree is never a generic “tree,” but is always a tree of one particular type or another. A stream never flows in the abstract, but always in this place or that place, around these particular rocks. Certainly humans and nonhumans can appreciate commonalities among trees and streams. But “nature” abstracts from the very specificity inherent to ecology and to ecological trauma. It is, in this sense, a contradiction in terms. As E. O. Wilson says, “Extinction is the most obscure and local of all biological processes. We don't see the last butterfly of its species snatched from the air by a bird or the last orchid of a certain kind killed by the collapse of its supporting tree”¹⁶ To say, for instance, “natural water resources are endangered” obscures the locative materiality of the local creek, its particular flow

14. Quoted in Sachs, “Global Ecology,” 18.

15. Lohmann, “Resisting Green Globalism,” 159.

16. Quoted in Thomashow, “Toward a Cosmopolitan Bioregionalism,” 122.

patterns, chemical threats, water oaks, and spotted salamanders beneath the placeless constructions of “water resources” and the “natural.”¹⁷

On the other side, the language of “nature vs. humans” identifies the environmental culprit as the human species. “Humans” here are also taken as a generic type, especially in discussions of population explosion and its impacts upon planetary ecosystems. In terms of biophysical consumption and production, however, humans are not all equal. The oft-cited statistic is that the twenty percent of the population living in Europe, North America, Oceania, and Japan are using roughly eighty percent of the planet’s resources and its garbage depositories. “If the South disappeared tomorrow, the environmental crisis would be still with us, but not if the North disappeared.”¹⁸ More specifically, an American child will use, during her lifetime, many times the energy, food, life, and water as an African child. But the image of the human-nature dichotomy obscures these huge disproportionalities.

Now “creation,” in contrast to “nature,” may transcend the dichotomy between humans and nonhumans. The doctrine of creation at least relativizes differences on earth against the great difference between creature and Creator, as we will see later in this chapter. This very fact, however, often obscures the great particularity of God’s material creation: God did not create a single “thing,” but a zillion different things, each with its own relationship to other kinds and to its Creator. This diversity and complexity is reflected in the Genesis account of different “days” of creation, and, to an extent, in biblical distinctions between domestic and wild animals. Similarly, Christian attitudes toward “wilderness” have experienced a different sort of history from Christian attitudes toward farms and gardens.¹⁹ Those differences should, I believe, be honored in our efforts to comprehend and improve our ecological discipleship. A tiger has

17. Of course, it is impossible to write about “nature” or “creation” without using some abstracting language. Here I shall try to use “the created order” or “the universe” as a rough synonym for the Greek *ta panta*: “everything that is.” In this context the universe might, in fact, be many universes; my point is to try to include all that is, without forgetting the infinite differences between the individuals that comprise “everything.”

18. Banuri, “Landscape of Political Conflicts,” 50.

19. See, for instance, Bratton, *Christianity*.

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more in common with a man than with a stone, and the tiger, stone, and man all share more with each other (I shall argue) than with their God. Disregard of these differences may arise from fears that humans will lose their "special place" in the created order, but it contributes to theological muddles as well as uncharitable behavior toward our fellow creatures.

All of this, of course, is not to reduce the doctrine of creation to its historical settings or to an ecological treatise on biodiversity. Such a move would deny our own historicity and any claim that our own traditions hold on us. The point is simply a caution that our own work is as contextual as anyone else's, and that part of our context includes a legacy of using generalizations about the created world to uphold unjust structures of power and domination. What follows, then, is not a universal narrative in the sense of being claimed (or claimable) by everyone, though it shares elements with other creation stories. Rather, it is the Christian doctrine of creation as it developed out of the Israelites' and early Christians' understanding of God. The story and doctrine laid out here are ecumenical in character, although certain points have been disputed by Christians at various places in various times. Given the desire to be sensitive to the socio-political effects of "creation" just as we are to "nature," I note contentious or perilous aspects of the Christian understanding of creation.

The Christian creation story exhibits a number of differences with the common creation story, some of which are implicit in the description below. The key difference for our purposes is that for Christians, creation is eschatological. It is not a thing to be preserved in stasis, but a universe of things and subjects and processes and relations all on their way to unity in God. Our job, then, is not to preserve the "thing" as if it were an object in lucite, but to honor the plethora of journeys and to witness to their future possibilities in Christ.²⁰

One of the primary messages of the Bible, delivered throughout and in many different styles, is that God is the origin and Lord of all. Thus it

20. This is not the place for an extensive treatment of the theme of Christian pilgrimage, but it may be fruitful to take seriously the idea that every part, parcel, penguin, and pineapple in creation is on its own pilgrimage to God. It would be important, of course, not to view such pilgrimages as atomistic, but somehow to conceive them as individual, yet interdependent.

is only right to begin a review of Christian doctrine about creation with attention to God's creating activity. The universe, including its materials and energies and inhabitants, is the result of God's activity, but all the power and initiation are God's. And if Christian life—in particular, our earth-oriented life—is our human response to the divine creating, sustaining, and redeeming work, it is helpful to review how that work is understood.

The very fact that God is Creator entails that, for Christians, the created universe is not a human construct, but reality. It is, of course, perceived and experienced and formulated in quite different ways by different creatures in different circumstances (including human creatures), but it is not a human invention. Creation, including us humans, is a God-made “thing.” The universe, the planet, and the divine intention precede us. In Wendell Berry's words, “we are living from mystery, from creatures we did not make and powers we cannot comprehend.”²¹ That being so, “created nonhuman being essentially transcends the circle of the human story.” It is bigger—physically, morally, and teleologically—than us humans.²²

GOD'S CREATING ACTIVITY

✿ What, then, do Christians understand about God's creative action? George Hendry writes that because God's creation is unique, and because it is the precondition of our experience rather than an object of our experience, it can be described only analogically. Christians have employed different models of creation, each with its advantages and disadvantages: procreation, fabrication (making), formation (molding), invention, expression, and emanation.²³ Procreation and emanation overstate the tie between God and the universe, while fabrication, formation, and invention may understate it.²⁴ Formation implies pre-existing material to be

21. Berry, *What Are People For?*, 152.

22. Lowes, “Up Close and Personal,” 135.

23. Hendry, *Theology of Nature*, 148ff.

24. The procreation model contradicts the church's claim that only Jesus Christ is begotten of God; God creates all else. On the other hand, feminists such as Catherine

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formed, which limits God's power and the scope of God's sovereignty (see the section on creation *ex nihilo*, below). Expression, therefore, may be the best analogy; God creates through self-expression of the divine love. Nonetheless, the other analogies should not be eliminated; a variety of models has biblical precedent and helps remind us that God's creative activity is not really like anything humans can describe or even imagine.

There has been broad agreement (though not unanimity) on several key elements of the act of creation: God's freedom and graciousness in creating, God's creating out of divine generosity and love, God's creating as trinitarian activity, God having created *ex nihilo* (these last two points were disputed in the early centuries, but rarely now), and God's creating as a continuous, sustaining activity that follows God's ultimate intentions for the created universe.

Creation as a Free Act of God

God is complete in Godself; God does not need this (or any other) universe for completion. God chooses to create out of perfect freedom, so all of creation depends for its existence upon the divine will. This idea has made some theologians nervous because it seems to make the natural order tenuous, as if a momentary fancy or fleeting inattention on God's part would destroy everything instantly.²⁵ Moreover, "if the divine will is overstressed, then God ends up seeming indifferent to creation—whether or not to create is a trivial decision on God's part."²⁶ So writers as diverse as Schiller, A. N. Whitehead, and Jonathan Edwards have posited that creation was in some way necessary for God—either an inevitable outgrowth of God's loving nature, or a completion of God's being.²⁷

Keller and Rosemary Radford Ruether strongly criticize the fabrication model as presenting the divine as aloof and largely indifferent to created reality. See Keller, "Power Lines," 55–77.

25. John Calvin did in fact believe that only God's constant restraining hand kept the creation from erupting into wholesale chaos, with elephants and other wild beasts charging into cities and attacking humans (Calvin *Commentary on Genesis* vol. I, IX, 2). For Calvin, though, this threat of disorder was a result of the Fall, not of God's freedom.

26. Hendry, *Theology of Nature*, 124.

27. Hendry, *Theology of Nature*, 121; Jonathan Edwards, "A Dissertation," 403–536.

Freedom, however, need not entail caprice, indifference, or unreliability, and desire is not compulsion. God desires and freely commits to a loving, providential and sovereign relationship with his creation, as testified to in Scripture.²⁸ (One human analogy to this is the free commitment people make to bind themselves in marriage, ordination, parenthood, or any other lifelong obligation.) Richard Hooker has a helpful way of describing the connection between divine love and divine freedom in creation: God freely consents to the limits set to divine action by divine nature.²⁹

Moreover, viewing creation as necessary for God poses dangers not only for our understanding of God (by limiting God's freedom, power, and transcendence), but also for our understanding of creation. Affirming God's freedom in creating (or not creating) provides us with a perspective on creation that avoids utter chance on the one hand, and inevitability on the other. The natural order was created according to God's will—whether that will was fulfilled through Big Bangs or little whispers. Had God willed otherwise, the universe might have been entirely different. (The use of the past tense *is*, of course, a concession to our own finitude, for time and space are elements of the creation, not of the creator.) The creation event, the created universe, and all its creatures are contingent, in being and nature, on the will of God. The universe in its fallen, corrupted state imperfectly fulfils the divine intent, but its being and enduring are according to God. Thus, despite the apparent serendipity of life on earth from a scientific perspective, the universe is not a product of chance, for God's intent is neither random nor capricious. On the other hand, we should not, as some environmentalists do, absolutize the natural order in which we participate, because it all could have been otherwise. This path between chance and inevitability, in turn, leads to a freer eschatology. Our visions of the Kingdom of God can be expanded by the knowledge that God's consummating activity need not adhere to the "laws of nature" as we understand them.

28. Schwöbel writes, "creation therefore has to be seen as an expression of the love of God who remains faithful to what he's created in love—not a temporary attitude adopted by God's will, but a relationship anchored in God's being," (Schwöbel, "God, Creation, and Community," 156).

29 Rowan Williams, "Hooker," 371.