

## **THE POSSIBILITY OF GOD**

### **The Spirit in God's Creation - and in God**

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How is God related to world? This is the question that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* represents. Does the universe possess an autonomous existence that constitutes an arena in which the Divine exists and acts, thus qualifying all divine being and act? Or is God utterly Other than world, the absolute and unqualified Creator who brings everything 'not God' into being and determines its existence? Or is the relation of God and world to be understood in terms of mutual modification? As part of its response to the classical tradition, Christian theology from the Patristic period on has insisted on the second of these alternatives. But in the last century other voices—above all, Process and now Openness-of-God theologies—have made themselves heard and begun the debate anew. In the following I suggest that if we were to pursue theology as a kind of constructive Pneumatology, a 'theology of the third article', and take such Pneumatology to be a field of discourse that shapes how we construe God and world we might very well come to a better—or at least to a different—understanding of the issue. For it could free us of the 'bi-polar disorder' that has so distorted our thinking about the relation between God and God's world.

Let me begin with the notion of Pneumatology as a field of discourse. Elsewhere I have argued that the western tradition has been dominated by two forms of theologizing. The first is seen most clearly in medieval Scholasticism and can for heuristic purposes be described as a theology of the first article of the creed. It interprets Christianity's witness to Christ from the perspective of God the Father, the "Creator of

heaven and earth". This interpretation is rooted in the call of Patristic Christianity to classical culture to find its fulfillment in the Christian gospel. It is thus a form of theology which makes creation, i.e. the capacities of our created nature, its point of departure, and interprets salvation accordingly as an ascent to the knowledge of God the Father and Creator of the world through the divine assistance of the grace mediated by the sacraments administered by the Church. It is theology of 'nature fulfilled by grace.'

The second dominant theological trajectory is represented by the Reformation. This tradition can be characterized as a theology of the second article of the creed, because it interprets the Christian witness from the standpoint of God the Son, who "for us and for our salvation...came down from heaven." Reformation theology was shaped by its protest against the root affirmation of Scholastic theology: that by virtue of being God's good creation human nature is open to and in search of its Creator. For not the goodness but the sin of the creature before the Creator, not the yearning for but the flight from God, is this theology's point of departure. It is thus cast not in the form of an appeal to the good, but in the form of a dialectic. Here, the Redeemer Jesus Christ as God's Word descends to and stands over and against creation, *extra nos*, confronting human beings in their sin and summoning them to faith in the grace of God made manifest in his death on the cross *pro nobis*. The tendency of this sort of theology, therefore, is to emphasize the contradiction between the two terms that define its proclamation of that Son: law and Gospel.

Today, I would suggest, Christian theology can best be pursued as a theology of the third article of the creed that renders its witness to God in Christ from the perspective of the creed's confession of the Holy Spirit as the "Lord and Giver of Life." Such a theology encompasses both creation and redemption from a perspective of creation and new creation. It reflects thereby the shape of the Biblical narrative itself, beginning as it does with the "creation of the heavens and the earth" in Genesis 1 and ending with the creation of "a new heaven and a new earth" that takes up and consummates all things in Revelation 21. Likewise, it reflects the shape of the creed that starts with the confession of God the Father, the Creator of "heaven and earth", and concludes with the confession of God the Holy Spirit and the anticipation of "the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." A theology of the third article, therefore, neither subordinates

redemption to creation in a theology of ‘nature fulfilled by grace’ nor subordinates creation to redemption in a theology of ‘law and gospel.’ Rather, it construes the relation between those fundamental dualities that have shaped western theology in terms of a phrase drawn from the Gospel according to John (1:16): *grace upon grace*."

Such a Pneumatological theology constitutes a ‘field of discourse’ in that it interprets and enacts all the aspects of Christian faith and practice from the perspective of the Spirit as the ‘Lord and Giver of Life’ in creation and new creation—just as the theologies of the first and second articles have interpreted that witness from their own particular points of departure. It does so not as an alternative to the Christological center of Christian faith or to the Trinitarian form of its confession, but rather as the very linguistic and conceptual mode in which Christianity speaks of and acts out God’s redemption of God’s creation as the new creation of creation in the Spirit and through the Son issuing in praise of and obedience to the Father. Today, I would suggest, such a decidedly Pneumatological theology could serve Christianity well in a variety of ways.

One of the ways that the pursuit of this kind of Pneumatology would be to our advantage is that it would better enable us to address the contemporary question of the way God is related to world. For if a theology of the third article of the creed starts with the Spirit, then it develops its understanding of the way God relates to creation in terms of the priority of divine possibility, not in terms of the priority of divine being as does a theology of the first article of the creed or the priority of divine will as does a theology of the second. As Eberhard Jüngel pointed out in his essay, *Die Welt als Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit*<sup>1</sup>, it was an act whose consequences for the history of the western intellectual tradition are almost impossible to overestimate, when Aristotle declared in his *Metaphysics*, *τὸ ὄντι προῖα τὸ δυνατόν*, that the real was necessarily prior to the possible (*Met.* *z*, 1049 b 5; cp. *z*, 1072 a 9). For this definition became constitutive for western thought as a whole and has shaped our conceptions of substance, of being, of time, and of language - and has gone beyond shaping our thinking to impacting our doing (our technology!) as well - from the classical to the modern periods.

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1 Eberhard Jüngel, "Die Welt als Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit", *Unterwegs zur Sache: Theologische Bemerkungen*, 2. Aufl., (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1988), 206-233.

It has also had a profound impact on the way we have conceived of the relation between God and world. But a theology of the third article does not begin with a metaphysical claim for the ontologically real or determinative; it starts rather with the Spirit of God who in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is identified as the possibility of God that brings the real into emergent being in the world. It is the Spirit who raises Jesus Christ from the dead who blows across the waters at the beginning and, at the speaking of the Word, brings forth creation from chaos.

This is, in fact, precisely the way the story of 'God's creation of the heavens and the earth' in Genesis 1:1-2:3 tells its tale: from beginning to end it is the story of God bringing forth creation in the possibility of the Spirit through the speaking of the Word. And this possibility is not just that God might be for the world, but also that the world might be for God. In the preliminary creative activities of the first two days of the 'week of days' ending with the Sabbath depicted there, God is portrayed in a manner that could be characterized as a 'subject' acting upon a 'object'. But from the third day on, once the light had been created (day one) and the waters separated (day two) and dry land made to appear (day three), the manner of God's creative activity takes on a very different character. For on the third day, in the midst of God's creative week, God's creating begins to take intermediate states in the event of creation itself into the process of further acts of creation, and the process of *creatio continua* becomes at one and the same time a process of *creatio ex creatione*. Thus we read on day three: "Then God said, '*Let the earth put forth* vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it'" (1:11), and on day five God commands, "*Let the waters bring forth* swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky" (1:20), and again, "*Let the earth bring forth* living creatures of every kind: cattle and creeping things and wild animals of the earth of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind" (1:24f). And thus the earth and the waters and the sky itself are included in the on-going 'transjective' creation of the world in which structures of commonality not only emerge and engender further commonalities, but are woven into the very warp and the woof of the fabric of the world in such a manner that they are intrinsic to the nature of creation itself. Yet it is only on the sixth day that this aspect of creation comes to its climax. For there we read that not only does God include

the creation in further acts of creation, thus engendering communities of commonality, but that God takes up the human in a special relationship with the Creator so that ‘he’, i.e., ‘Adam’ (1:27a; cp. 2:7) - ‘the’ human who is in reality the community of male and female (1:27c) - might be nothing less than the image of God in the world (1:27b). That image to be understood not as ontological or as determinative but as ‘missional’, as participating in the creative activity of God in the world: specifically as ‘filling’ and ‘subduing’ and exercising ‘dominion’ over creation (1:28) and thus heralding the seventh day of Sabbath rest (2:2)

This depiction of God’s creation of the heavens and the earth, therefore, is not simply about God acting in a vacuum or upon an object—any more than it is about two eternally existent entities mutually modifying one another. It is about a complex event in which creation is called into being by the Word in the field of the Spirit and is then taken up in acts of further creation on its way to the fellowship of the Sabbath day—represented in the New Testament by the words: ‘abba Father’. But if at no point is any stage of creation to be thought of as ‘nothing’, then in none of these acts of further creation are we to suppose that there is some innate *capax* of nature that would allow it of itself to bring about the ‘new’ or the ‘further’. For this is a process in which God’s possibility, the possibility of the Spirit, unexpectedly emerges in ever new acts of creation, acts in which God’s *capax creaturae* includes the creature in the very processes of creation itself.

I suggest that this interpretation of the narrative as a whole sheds some light on how we might best understand the question of *creatio ex nihilo* in Genesis 1:2. On the one hand, I think we can make the exegetical case that its depiction of chaos does indeed represent the functional equivalent of ‘nothing’. For chaos as depicted in 1:2 does contribute nothing whatsoever to God’s creation. The traditional account thus makes a legitimate and an important point when it emphasizes that God does not create the world out of something pre-existent. For God is not the timeless correlate but the Creator of the universe with and in time. Yet on the other hand, we must also insist that if that first emphasis is the sole lens through which we read this narrative, then something at least just as legitimate and important is obscured— and that is the manner in which God relates to the world that God is creating. The universe is neither driven nor drawn by God; it ‘lives and moves and has its being’ from first to last in a possibility that is not its own but

it comes to own in the course of the event of its unfolding creation. Just as the world is indeed not to be conceived of as a subject seeking to co-operate with a deity that is its correlate, so God is not to be confused with the Creator of a world that is divinity's object. Creation, rather is to be understood as a transjective event in which the unfolding of the complex life of the one God who is Spirit, Son and Father brings forth the complex life of the world in the possibility of God. Thus the traditional, essentially binitarian conception of the God/world relationship—the source of the 'bi-polar disorder' that has so confused our minds on these matter—must give way to a truly Trinitarian account of God in the world and the world in God. And that account begins with the Spirit of God moving through the watery abyss as the possibility of God for a world and of a world for God.