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Creation as frame-by-frame projection from the mind of God

The theme of this essay is the activity of God—or more accurately part of the activity of God. Although creation is the *first* reported activity of God, it is possible to claim that it is both the continuous and the essential activity of God.

Were we to be asked, 'In what activity is God reported to engage more often than any other?', most of us would guess at speech. 'And God said' or 'Thus says the Lord' or some equivalent words are surely the most repeated phrases in the Bible. Texts could be taken from thousands of places: Young's *Analytical Concordance* lists over 7,000 references to one phrase alone—'The Lord God said'. Those with the necessary combination of Hebrew and patience can search in this context for subtleties among the several words translated as 'God' or 'Lord God', but here it is assumed that the only God, our Saviour through Jesus Christ our Lord, is referred to by all the separate designations. It becomes clear then that the Lord our God is supremely a Being who communicates—One Who Speaks—and often it is through His speech that God acts.

The words from Genesis 1:3: 'And God said . . . and there was' emphasise this. We will consider then *not* the speech of God, but the creative activity of God. 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth' and creation is the continuous and essential activity of God.

Behind all the pictures we may have of God as Lawgiver or God as Saviour—and Israel knew God as Saviour before the Law was given at Sinai—behind all these pictures and supreme above them is God as Creator.

Our understanding of the relationship of God to His creation has implications for our faith. The right understanding here will help us to appropriate in faith, rather than waver in doubt or wallow in incredulity! For the scheme of things to exist as we know it, IT IS ESSENTIAL THAT GOD BE CREATOR CONTINUOUSLY. He is active so that the world and everything in it can endure. Our universe is held in being by God, sustained not so much by the odd bit of tinkering here and there, as by moment

by moment creation. We are, *in general*, totally unaware of any discontinuity because, *in general*, the new creation is so contiguous with the old that no gap is perceived and an apparent consistency is revealed to us. We live at such a pace that the frame jump from one picture to the next is not noticeable—in general. The analogy of the cine film is a useful one, and to exploit it further we can conceive of the universe as projected from the mind of God frame by frame: not a pushing along of something set in motion at the beginning, so much as a continual making new of the scene in each frame.

The rational universe in which the scientists presume that we live is so, only for as long as God continues to act rationally, maintaining the apparently unbroken sequence of events.

This view of the connection between Creator and creation derives in part from reflection on the divine name. Certainly as disclosed to Moses the 'I am who I am' has about it an aura of independency. God's continued existence does not depend on our thinking about Him, but our continued existence does depend on His thinking about us. It is in this sense that sparrows, sold two for a penny and five for tuppence, do not fall to the ground without the Father's will, nor is one of them forgotten before God.

As the Psalmist reminds us, 'It is He that hath made us and not we ourselves'. In this connection the prayer of Sir Jacob Astley before the battle of Edgehill in 1642 becomes pregnant with new meaning: 'O Lord, Thou knowest how busy I must be this day; if I forget Thee, do not Thou forget me'.

Now the suggestion that the mind of God was active in creation is not new. The 'Logos' of John's Prologue has long been interpreted by some as the mind of God. But the idea of a moment by moment recreative projection is somewhat novel. It has obvious affinities with the illustration of the television screen under the control of an electronic wizard whose skill and artistry allow him to present a series of pictures of anything he chooses—of, for example, a cricket match. Prof. Donald MacKay, who originated the illustration, reminds us in *The Clockwork Image* that those who watch the sequence of pictures will be able to deduce the laws of cricket, and perhaps even the laws of mechanics in so far as analysis of the ball's flight pattern allows it, BUT ONLY SO LONG AS THE CREATOR OF THE SCENES MAINTAINS THE ORDERLY PATTERN.¹

1. D. M. MacKay, *The Clockwork Image*, IVP, 1974.

Two things follow: the analysis will not reveal the electronic artist, only the rational nature of the world he creates. Also the scientific analysis of the scenario, whether on Prof. MacKay's TV or my projected film, does not lose its value when it is recognised that it is held in being by an external agent. We should note that there is no need for gaps in the scientific account (as a place where the artist has his role); however complete the scientific understanding of the sequence of pictures it is their very existence which demands an explanation. And that explanation is beyond the power of science to give, for science has its self-imposed limitations, as its analysis of art or music or drama reveals.

We move on now to begin an exploration of the consequences of God's continuously creating the world as we know it—although this really reflects another of the approach roads to this thesis.

Insistence on continuity has been carefully qualified by the use of 'generally'. For in this model of the relationship of God and His creation—and it is no more than a very useful model—there is obviously scope for Miracle and, along with miracle, for Prayer. Much of our intercessory praying is a demand for the miraculous or at the very least for the extraordinary: although, as Fosdick points out, our Heavenly Father exploits the laws the scientist finds in nature more often than He transcends them.²

Let us consider first miracles in persons: Paul says, 'If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation'. Many will testify to this transforming experience. By way of example, a one-time practising homosexual said, 'When I admitted to my companions that I had received Christ into my life I was filled with a sudden, surprising awareness that He was real, and was in me, and that I was now a completely new person.' Only those who have struggled to 'heal themselves' can really know the release which recreation by God can bring. We turned to Him, and He said, 'let there be a new creation' and there was!

But miracles are not only in persons. Most of us are familiar with the tricks of photography, and even when we know how it is done we still enjoy the illusion. The heavenly Producer/Director is able, between the creation in one frame and the recreation in the next, to change water into wine at a wedding or water into blood in a river. He can also add to the matter in the universe from one frame to the next to provide manna in the

2. H. E. Fosdick, *The Meaning of Prayer*, Fontana, 1960, p.127.

wilderness or to multiply loaves and fishes. We may not add one cubit to our stature by taking thought, but God can add to His creation merely by thinking about it.

For some, the ascension with its de-materialisation of the body of Jesus poses problems. But the disappearance between one frame and the next of the body of the ascended Lord need not require the release of energy equivalent to 70 or 80 kg of matter. With God continuously creating, the option lies with Him to add to or subtract from the matter He is mentally handling, and our laws of conservation are principles for human guidance not for divine obedience.

Having said this, we should remember, as C. S. Lewis has pointed out, that nature is extremely adept at accommodating miracles. Miraculous food is digested in the usual way and sustains the body as effectively as ordinary food. A miraculous conception leads to a usual nine-months pregnancy, and the Holy Child is born in the usual way to grow from the vulnerability of babyhood to be a man among men, tempted in all points like we are, at every stage of the way. The marvel is not that God is born of a virgin, but that God is born at all!³

It is said that Alfred Hitchcock appeared in every film he made—coming from behind the projector as it were to be on the screen. God is no less able. There is immense intellectual satisfaction in God's chosen way to combine in one person the fully divine and fully human natures, conceived of the Holy Ghost and born of the virgin Mary—the fusion of human and divine.

Mention of C. S. Lewis reminds me that this filmstrip model may owe something to one of his *Letters to Malcolm*. There he describes the assault with a chisel on a house that is part of a stage set. The attacker discovers it is not a real house, but it remains a real stage set. No chips of stone, but holed canvas and windy darkness. To learn that our universe is made up of fundamental particles described by mathematical equations is analogous. We find reality to be other than we had supposed. Our shock can be no less if our environment and indeed ourselves are in reality the equivalent of projections on a screen.⁴

But what is real? Ultimately only God is real. And God said, 'Let there be . . . and there was'. And God continues to say, 'Let there be', and there is! Moreover the instant He no longer says, 'Let there be a consciousness called by our name', we shall

3. C. S. Lewis, *Miracles*, Fontana, 1960, p.63

4. C. S. Lewis, *Letters to Malcolm*, Fontana, 1966, p.82f.

cease to exist. Such a time may never come; the love He has shown to individuals supremely in Jesus, suggests that, for reasons not easy to understand, individuals matter to Him. He has made us for Himself, and our hearts can find no rest until they rest in Him.

For others who deny that He is real, He may one day out of kindness, no longer say, 'Let them be,' and they will then cease to exist.

This model has to overcome two problems. The first and more serious is a sharpened version of the traditional paradox of God's omniscience and our free will. If God's thoughts determine the content of the next frame, how can the individual exert any influence over it? The Christian claims that the Creator has allowed free will and that our choices are genuine, albeit conditioned in part by previous experiences and our own or other people's choices. Once we have made a choice the consequences work out in accordance with the divine logic. In the normal way of things, they follow scientific laws by which God orders His creation. But how can a choice be made in the first place?

The outworkings possible from a given set of circumstances may appear to be many, but analysis can break down the complexity into a branching and interlocking sequence which involves a series of selections between two options (the initial choice limiting or making possible subsequent ones). At some levels we are conscious of this: e.g. if I choose not to submit this manuscript, the editor cannot choose whether to publish it or not.

In that the Christian conceives of God as active in His creation, especially in Man through His Holy Spirit, there is feedback from the first frame which can influence the content of the second. Also the actual choice may be made over a series of frames, and the incipient and growing decision is all that need be built in. What does seem clear is that we cannot unmake a choice and its consequences.

The second problem is the enigma of innocent suffering and the mystery of evil. It may be asked why, in the process of creating a new frame, the Creator cannot omit these. In a sense He could, but were He to do so it would involve the end of the scheme of things as we know it. The end of the age would arrive. For the Creator has committed Himself to a programme which in many ways limits the options open to Him. He may not, without frustrating His own objectives, override the freedom—the true

freedom—to be independent that He has given man. We can deny Him, but though we deny Him, He will not deny us (for the moment). So He has held the travailing creation in being until now, and will do so until He ceases to say, 'let there be'.

Meanwhile for those of us who know Him: It is the God who says, 'Let light shine out of darkness', Who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Cor. 4:6). In knowing Christ we know God the Creator. For creation is His continuing and, for us, necessary activity. God said, 'Let there be . . . and there was'; He yet says, 'Let there be' . . . and there is!