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The Lutheran View of Creation—II

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(Continued from Volume XIII, Number 2)

In his *Christian Dogmatics* Franz Pieper (Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod) follows the theologians of the Lutheran Orthodoxy quite closely: 'While heathen pantheism assumes that the world is an emanation from God and is therefore God Himself, and heathen dualism assumes an eternal matter of which the deity formed the world (*hyle, nous, cosmos*), Holy Scripture teaches that the Triune God created everything outside God, the universe, through his mere will, out of nothing. And "nothing" does not mean a *materia ex qua*, a *nihil positivum* (Plato's *me on*, chaos), but it means absolutely nothing, *nihil negativum, materiam excludens*; for, as Gen. 1:1 tells us, before the creation of the world nothing at all was in existence except God . . . Men are bound by the rule, *De nihilo nihil fit* (nothing comes from nothing), but not so God . . . Accordingly, only he knows God who knows that He created the world from nothing.¹ Pieper holds to the interpretation of the six days as 24-hour periods. He outlines the progressive nature of creation from inorganic to organic.² Against a theory of evolution he states: 'This order observed by God cannot be interpreted as a self-development of the creature (evolution), for in the various stages of the order recorded everything depends on the divine monergism. The earth, for instance, does not produce grass and herbs (v. 11) and living creatures (v. 24) by way of self-development, but by the Word of the Almighty: "Let the earth bring forth", the earth causes plant life and animal life to spring forth.'³ The continued existence of all creatures is also due to God's activity. 'As the creation of the creatures is God's work, so, too, their continued existence, their activity, and their propagation depend solely on the continued operation of God, not on a "spontaneous activity" of the creatures, nor

¹ F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. I, p. 467 f.

² *Ibid.*, p. 468 f.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 469.

partly or entirely on evolution. For Col. 1:17 tells us: "By Him all things consist" and Acts 17:28: "In Him we live, and move, and have our being".⁴ In discussing the work of the six days he dismisses the theory that the *tohu wabohu* denotes the remnants of a previous creation which perished when some of the angels fell, as not having a basis in the text.⁵ After a detailed discussion of the work of the six days, Pieper raises the question whether this account was given to Moses by direct revelation or whether he received it by oral transmission. His answer is that this 'is immaterial, for in either case the Biblical report is God's own report, since all Scripture is given by inspiration of God'.⁶

The substance of Pieper's teaching was summarized in a document prepared to give the doctrinal position of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and adopted by that body in 1932 and made binding on all teachers and pastors in 1959. (It was declared 'unconstitutional' in 1962). The article 'Of Creation' reads:

'We teach that God has created heaven and earth, and that in the manner and in the space of time recorded in the Holy Scriptures, especially Genesis 1 and 2, namely, by His almighty creative word and in six days. We reject every doctrine which denies or limits the work of creation as taught in Scripture. In our days it is denied or limited by those who assert, ostensibly in deference to science, that the world came into existence through a process of evolution; that is, that it has, in immense periods of time, developed more or less out of itself. Since no man was present when it pleased God to create the world, we must look for a reliable account of creation to God's own record, found in God's own book, the Bible. We accept God's own record with full confidence, and confess with Luther's Catechism: "I believe that God has made me and all creatures".'

As a result of the doctrinal discussions between the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod and the American Lutheran Church a document called the 'Common Confession' was drawn up and adopted in 1956. The article on 'God' reads in part:

'We believe and teach: The one and only God is the God who has revealed Himself to us as the Creator of the world and Its Preserver, to whom the entire creation and all creatures are subject, who is the Lord and Ruler over all things.'⁸

⁴ F. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. I, p. 470.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 471.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 478.

⁷ *Doctrinal Declarations*, 1957, p. 44.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

In 1952 the churches of the American Lutheran Conference adopted a statement called 'United Testimony on Faith and Life'. It has the following paragraph on this subject:

'We believe in God the Father, Creator and Preserver of the world, who in His divine majesty is infinitely exalted above His creatures, and who in fatherly compassion seeks the eternal welfare of man, whom He made in His own image but who has fallen into sin and lives in the bondage of sin.'⁹

With immaterial variations in substance the literature of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod follows the position of Franz Pieper.¹⁰

A somewhat different viewpoint is expressed in *Christian Dogmatics* by C. E. Lindberg. This was first published in Sweden in 1898 and in America in English in 1922 by the Augustana Publishing House. Although Lindberg quotes from the theologians of the Orthodox period he admits the possibility of different interpretations for the term 'day'. He seems favourably inclined to a theory of protracted time in Gen. 1:1, thus allowing room for geological ages. He does not believe that there are any data in the Genesis account which would support 'pseudo-evolution', the transmutation of the homogeneous into the heterogeneous. He believes that the Biblical narrative of creation contains only 'an outline, but will stand the test of true science'.¹¹

II

It would be incorrect to leave the impression that the above is an adequate statement of the doctrine of creation in American Lutheranism today. In addition to the viewpoints which have been cited there is a wide variation on the interpretation on the Genesis accounts. In general, recent literature tends to the view that these accounts are not historical realities but historical 'myths' by means of which the religious consciousness of the people gives expression to what it believes to be religiously true. Anthropomorphic language is used to express the fundamental reality of man's creatureliness and of his total dependence on God as sovereign Creator and Lord. The particular method by which this relationship was established is not considered relevant to the fact itself. The main purpose of the account, then, is to teach us a religious lesson and not to give us a scientific explanation of the origin of the world and man.

⁹ *Doctrinal Declarations*, 1957, p. 92.

¹⁰ Paul Zimmermann, ed., *Darwin Evolution and Creation*; Theo. Graebner, *God and the Cosmos*; G. Viehweg, *The Doctrine of Creation in Abiding Word*, Vol. I; Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*.

¹¹ C. E. Lindberg, *Christian Dogmatics*, pp. 103-111 *passim*.

Since the publication of Paul Tillich's *Systematic Theology* in 1950 there has been further development in the doctrine of creation. Although Tillich (as far as I know) is not officially connected with any Lutheran church body, he is the son of a Lutheran pastor and 'confesses an allegiance to the Lutheran tradition "by birth, education, religious experience, and theological reflection"'.¹²

Although it is obviously impossible to summarize Tillich's theology in the space of this paper, his influence on many present-day Lutheran theologians is so great that a few notes are necessary. In discussing the use of the term 'myth' with reference to such accounts as Gen. 1 and 2 he points out that 'all mythological elements in the Bible, and doctrine and liturgy should be recognized as mythological, but they should be maintained in their symbolic form and not be replaced by scientific substitutes. For there is no substitute for the use of symbols and myths: they are the language of faith'.¹³ He accepts the necessity of demythologization if it emphasizes the necessity of recognizing 'a symbol as a symbol and a myth as a myth'. But the process is to be rejected 'if it means the removal of symbols and myths altogether'.¹⁴ 'The resistance against demythologization expresses itself in "literalism". The symbols and myths are understood in their immediate meaning. The material, taken from nature and history, is used in its proper sense. The character of the symbol to point beyond itself to something else is disregarded. Creation is taken as a magic act which happened once upon a time. The fall of Adam is localized on a special geographical point and attributed to a human individual'.¹⁵

Tillich expresses his understanding of the relation between faith and science as follows: 'Science can conflict only with science, and faith only with faith; science which remains science cannot conflict with faith which remains faith. . . . The famous struggle between the theory of evolution and the theology of some Christian groups was not a struggle between science and faith, but between a science whose faith deprived man of his humanity and a faith whose expression was distorted by Biblical literalism. It is obvious that a theology which interprets the Biblical story of creation as a scientific description of an event which happened once upon a time interferes with the methodologically controlled scientific work; and that a theory of evolution which interprets man's descent from older forms of life in a way that removes the infinite, qualitative difference between man and animal is faith and not science'.¹⁶

¹² Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, Introd. IX, by R. H. Daubney.

¹³ Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith*, p. 51.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82 f.

In his *Systematic Theology* he develops the concept that the divine life is 'creative, actualizing itself in inexhaustible abundance. The divine life and the divine creativity are not different. God is creative because he is God.'¹⁷ Concerning the doctrine of creation he says that it is not the story of an event which took place 'once upon a time'. 'It is the basic description of the relation between God and the world. It is the correlate to the analysis of man's finitude. It answers the question implied in man's finitude and in finitude generally. In giving this answer, it discovers the meaning of finitude in creatureliness. The doctrine of creation is the answer to the question implied in the creature as creature . . . The doctrine of creation does not describe an event. It points to the situation of creatureliness and to its correlate, divine creativity.'¹⁸ Tillich finds in the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* Christianity's protection against any type of ultimate dualism. The two fundamental truths expressed by this doctrine are that the 'tragic character of existence is not rooted in the creative ground of being; consequently, it does not belong to the essential nature of things'.¹⁹ Man cannot avoid the tragic element in existence by ridding himself of the finite, by a form of 'ontological asceticism'. The other truth expressed in the doctrine is 'that there is an element of non-being in creatureliness' through which man sees the natural necessity of death.²⁰ When the Nicene Creed refers to God as the creator of everything 'visible and invisible', this phrase has the 'protective function' of denying the 'Platonic doctrine that the creator-god is dependent on the eternal essences or ideas, the powers of being which make a thing what it is'.²¹

Tillich follows Augustine and Luther when he speaks of preservation as the continuous creativity of God, by which out of eternity He creates things and time together. He finds in this concept the line of defence against the 'contemporary half-deistic, half-theistic way of conceiving God as being alongside the world'.²² 'God is essentially creative, and therefore he is creative in every moment of temporal existence, giving the power of being to everything that has being out of the creative ground of the divine life. There is, however, a decisive difference between originating and sustaining creativity. The latter refers to the given structures of reality, to that which continues within the change, to the regular and calculable in things. Without the static element, finite being would not be able to identify itself with itself or anything with anything. Without

¹⁷ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, p. 252.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 252 f.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 253 f.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 254.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 262 *passim*.

it, neither expectation, nor action for the future, nor a place to stand upon would be possible; and therefore being would not be possible. The faith in God's sustaining creativity is the faith in the continuity of the structure of reality as the basis for being and acting.²³

Tillich does not see much point in asking what the purpose of creation was. It has no purpose beyond itself. From the viewpoint of the creature it is the creature itself. From the viewpoint of the Creator it is the exercise of his creativity. Calvinist theology in making the glory of God the purpose of creation, and Lutheran theology in making 'the communion of love with his creatures' the purpose of creation, both deny that there is any lack in God, or that there is anything which the created world can offer God.²⁴

The views of Tillich have been criticized by R. Allen Killan. He feels that Tillich's argument for a *creatio ex nihilo* does not mean creation as the act of a self-conscious moral being, such as 'the God revealed in Scripture'. 'Creation is simply an actualization of the divine life and a result of the dialectical movement caused within God in the first place by Non-Being.'²⁵

III

Among the Scandinavian theologians Gustaf Aulen's *The Faith of the Christian Church* has had widespread influence. A few pertinent quotations from this will have to suffice. Under the section 'God as Creator' he writes:

'When the work of God is viewed as creative activity it expresses in a special way the sovereignty of divine love. Faith in God as Creator is not a theory about the origin of the world through a "first cause", etc. It has in reality nothing in common with a rational explanation of the universe. It arises out of the confrontation with the life-giving, sovereign God, and the relationship between God and man is determined by this encounter.

'Christian faith as faith in the Creator differentiates itself, on the one hand, from metaphysical idealism which blurs the distinction between the divine and "highest human"; and on the other hand, from metaphysical dualism which regards this finite life as evil. On the contrary, faith in God as Creator affirms that all existence is entirely dependent on God, that this life is good since it is given by Him who is "the giver of all good gifts", and that this gift therefore imposes an unconditional obligation on the creature.

²³ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I, p. 262.

²⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 264.

²⁵ R. Allen Killan, *The Ontological Theology of Paul Tillich*, p. 241.

‘If creation, therefore, is primarily the life-giving work of sovereign divine love, it implies that its origin as well as its perdurance depends on this loving will, which also gives it its meaning. The ultimate goal of creation does not lie within the course of this world. It is attained through the continuous creation, which at the same time appears as a “new creation”, “new heavens and a new earth”.’²⁶

In enlarging on these three theses Aulen emphasizes that faith’s ‘affirmation about creation does not imply a theoretical proposition about the origin of the universe, but rather a religious statement about the nature of the relation between God and man.’²⁷ ‘Faith in God as Creator arises out of the confrontation of faith with the saving and condemning love of God. The divine act of salvation appears to faith in reality as an act of creation’. ‘When creation is thus anchored to God’s act of salvation, two aspects of creation are thereby immediately suggested: creation is a continuous process, and the creative activity is throughout an expression of God’s love.’ ‘If God’s act of creation is the establishment of the dominion of his love, creation can no longer be conceived of as an isolated act, or as an act accomplished and finished by God at a certain point in time, “in the beginning”.’ To speak thus would be to say that ‘God no longer reveals himself’. ‘If he reveals himself continually, he also creates continually, for God’s revelation is always a recreation.’²⁸

Aulen insists that ‘Christian faith in God as Creator is opposed . . . both to that pessimistic world view which regards existence as meaningless repetition, and to that evolutionistic and optimistic view which attempts to find the meaning in continuous progress toward a goal of perfection attainable in this world. Christian faith finds the meaning of existence in the fact that every moment has eternal significance, since it involves a decision for or against the will of God.’²⁹

A book by another Swedish writer, Gustaf Wingren, *Creation and Law*, has been published in English in 1961. This will, no doubt, have a wide influence on the further development of the doctrine of creation within the framework of the Lutheran Confessions. Wingren points out that the first article of the Creed does not seem to have become part of the Church’s confession until the appearance of the Gnostics who attempted to dissociate the created world from God.³⁰ He feels that we cannot speak of creation without using anthropomorphic

²⁶ G. Aulen, *The Faith of the Christian Church*, p. 181.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 182 f. *passim*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

³⁰ G. Wingren, *Creation and Law*, p. 4.

language. 'As soon as we begin with the work of creation as the first of God's works, it follows clearly that we must adhere to a simple anthropomorphic account of the subsequent works of God to which both the Bible and the Creed testify'.³¹ Both the second and the third articles are extensions of the work of creation, in which the man Jesus Christ has come as the second Adam for the purpose of establishing a 'new creation' which looks toward the events of the last time. Wingren believes that a belief in creation and everything which follows from it is the only possible way to achieve a total view of life. By constructing a theology on the New Testament, or with the second article of the Creed as a starting point, we have to introduce some kind of 'philosophical framework before the New Testament, into which we then insert the Christian faith of the early Christian *kerygma*'.³² Creation should always remain the starting point of our theology. 'But', he says, 'creation means at the one time both the creation of the world, the creation of heaven and earth, and my personal creation, that is, my birth. This was Luther's great understanding of both the first and the second articles of the Creed: ". . . He has created *me* . . . given me body and soul . . . He is *my* Lord".³³ The primary meaning of creation is not that we are given a knowledge about God, but that life is bestowed on man. This life is not independent of God. When God's work of creation is confined to a particular point in the past we have no 'real understanding of God as continuing to create in the present, or of life itself as God's continuing creation'.³⁴ The Old Testament testifies that the creation was done by the Word of God, and the Spirit of God. It is this Word which became flesh and which was anointed by the Spirit, who was poured forth by Christ and continues the work of creation in the present time.³⁵ The New Testament states that the world was created in Christ (Col. 1: 16 ff. ; Heb. 1: 2). It also pictures Christ as having a cosmic position in the eschaton, where His power extends over the world. This concept is understandable only if we realize that man as man, every man, is created in Christ. Therefore, belief in creation does not mean, in the first place, creation of the world, but belief that 'God has created me and all creatures'. Our relation to the Creator is due to the gift of life itself. This remains whether men use the term 'God' or not.³⁶

This thought is developed in the following way: 'To say that man, as a creature who has been born on earth, is created in Christ, is to use a term which is quite unmythological. It

³¹ G. Wingren, *Creation and Law*, p. 23.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 25.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, cf. p. 31.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

means simply that what man is offered in the incarnate Son is "life". The Creator who lets man live and who thereby creates him, creates him in his image (Gen. 1:16 f.), and this image in which every man is created is Jesus Christ, who is "the image of the invisible God, the first born of all creation" (Col. 1:15). The "new man" whom the believer in Christ puts on (Rom. 13:14; Gal. 3:27) is Christ Himself. This is what God the Creator intended man to be in creation. To become like Christ, therefore, is also to conform to God's will in creation and to receive life (cf. Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24).³⁷ This section is followed by an interesting comparison between the life of Adam and the life of Christ.

Wingren also points out that the word 'Creation' is often used to denote a *result* of the act of creation, which now exists by itself. This line of thought leads to the loss of the assurance that God is creating *now*, and 'that life itself is the other side of God's continuing creative activity . . . God was not active only when the world of men came into being, so that what we have now to deal with are the end-products of His original creation. But when we move and breathe we are in a living relationship to the Creator whose work is still continuing'.³⁸

Summation :

The above survey will show the difficulty which confronts one who is asked to outline the Lutheran position on such a doctrine as that of creation. Within the framework of Lutheran theology as outlined in the introduction to this paper there is room for a variety of opinions. The following points may, however, be mentioned as distinctive of the Lutheran position:

1. Creation is an act of God, which has both originating and continuing significance and reality.

2. Its meaning is that it describes a reality of relationship between the individual person and God from which no man can separate himself.

3. This relationship is in Christ, who is both the creator and the creature.

4. The creative activity of God finds its *telos* in the new creation in Christ.

5. This 'prehistoric' creation in Christ and the new creation in the Gospel are the bonds which bind together all men, whether in 'nature' or in 'faith', just as their life is derived from the one Creator, to whom they are related by this life.

³⁷ G. Wingren, *Creation and Law*, p. 35.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46 f. *passim*.