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PRESERVING GOD'S CREATION THREE LECTURES ON THEOLOGY AND ECOLOGY

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Editorial Note

We publish here the second of Professor Zizoulas' lectures, given at King's College in January 1989, and repeat what we said of the first, that it is printed as delivered, and not in the final form in which its author may eventually wish to develop it.

LECTURE TWO

INTRODUCTION

In our previous lecture, we emphasized the seriousness of the situation with which humanity, and indeed our planet as a whole, are faced because of the ecological problem, and tried to look briefly at history in order to see to what extent (a) Christian theology could be regarded as responsible for the ecological crisis of our time, and (b) Christian tradition could be of help in our attempt to deal with this crisis. Our brief and inevitably generalized historical survey led us to the conclusion that the Christian Church and its theology have indeed been to a large extent responsible for the emergence of the ecological problem in our time, but that, in spite of that, they possess resources that can be of help to humanity in its present crisis. The ecological problem, therefore, although being a problem of science and to a large degree of ethics, education and state legislation, is also a theological problem. As it is evident that certain theological ideas have played an important role in the creation of the problem, so it must be the case too, that the theological ideas can influence the course of events in the reverse way.

Theology cannot and should not be irrelevant to the creation of culture. It is unfortunate that Christian theology has in our time very often taken a negative view of culture, science, etc., very much in contradiction to its fundamental claims and beliefs. And it is equally regrettable that owing to pressures from the Enlightenment, theology and the Church have been marginalized in our Western society and became incapable of doing harm as well as good to modern culture. One would suspect that, from the way things develop in our modern world, the absence of theology from our culture will be felt very deeply, as science, ethics, etc., appear increasingly unable to handle situations such as the one created by the ecological problem. For it is necessary to repeat the point I tried to underline in the previous lecture, namely that without a world-view that involves religious and what we may call *liturgical* attitudes to creation it will be impossible to reverse the alarming situation the world is facing today.

How does Christian theology view creation and man's place in it? This is the question to which we must now address ourselves. If Christian theology has somehow led the world to its present crisis, by what ideas can it now help the world to deal with it?

In order to answer this question, we propose to deal first with the way Christian tradition views the reality we normally call *creation*. This will be the task of tonight's lecture. Our next step in tomorrow's lecture will concern more specifically the role man is called to play in creation. It will then, we hope, be possible to draw some conclusions as to what Christian theology and the Church can offer to man in the difficult crisis he is faced with in our time.

I. Doctrines of Creation in the First Centuries

"Creation" is a term which Christian theology found from the beginning to be convenient in order to express its world view. It is a term which indicates that the world as we know it is a work or a product of someone, the result of a certain personal cause. The normal Greek term corresponding to creation is *demiourgia*, although the Christian writers of the first centuries, for reasons to which we shall refer presently, prefer to use the term *ktisis* — a word that brings to mind images of craftsmanship, or rather of building and raising an edifice.

Now, the view of the world as a 'creation' by someone was by no means a Judeo-Christian invention. The idea was widespread at the time of the rise of Christianity that the world was created by some creator, and what the Church had to do was not so much to insist on this idea as to offer its own interpretation of it. True, there were still around some atheists in the first and second centuries A.D. who would either attribute the world to certain laws inherent in its nature and be happy with this explanation (such were the "physiologists" whom Plato had in mind in providing for them a stiff penalty, inscribed in his *Laws*; or who, like Epicureans, would attribute the world to pure chance. But all these were negligible, almost marginalized in the intellectual milieu in which the Early Church found itself, and it is for this reason that the Christian writers did not bother very much about them. The main views of creation that the Church had to face and from which it was seen to dissociate itself fell into two categories. One was the *Gnostic* interpretation of creation, and the other was what we may call *Platonic* or classical Greek philosophical view. To these two we shall briefly turn in order to see in what way the Christian concept of creation took its shape in this early period.

Gnosticism took the view that the world in which we live is so penetrated with evil, pain, suffering, etc., that it could not have been created by God, the Father whose goodness would never have allowed Him to create such a world. Thus, in order to keep God the Father free from any responsibility for the evil that permeates the world, Gnosticism attributed creation to the lowest of the intermediaries between the ineffable Father and the world. This it called *Demiourgos* (literally "Creator"), and made him responsible for creation. Gnosticism believed that creation is bad by definition and had no interest in saving it, particularly in its material form. Man was created (according to certain Gnostic myths) before the material world was made, and his present material state of existence constitutes his fall. Salvation is achieved through knowledge (*gnosis* — hence the name of this heresy), a secret knowledge of the truth taught by the teachers of

the Gnostic schools. It is through an escape from time and space that man can be saved. Caring for this material world is the most absurd and in fact sinful thing there is. The *sooner* you get away from the material world the better.

It is known to all of you that the Church took a very negative attitude towards Gnosticism. Great theologians of that time, in particular St Irenaeus, bishop of Lyon at the end of the 2nd century, wrote treatises against the Gnostics. The result of this anti-Gnostic polemic was to have a statement included in the early baptismal creeds of the local churches, which finally became part of Creed we all use in the liturgy, declaring that it is *God the Father* who made the material world ("I believe in God the Father maker of heaven and earth") and that consequently the material world ("all things visible and invisible") is good, since it was made by God the Father Himself. Evil is of course a problem. But this should not lead us to the conclusion that the world is bad by nature and that it is not God's creation. The Church had to find other ways of explaining the presence of evil without attributing it either to God or to the material world. On this matter we shall have an opportunity to say more later on.

So much for Gnosticism which introduced a gap between God and Creation. Platonism and the mainstream classical Greek thought took the extreme opposite position. For them not only was the gap between God and the world narrowed to the point of often disappearing altogether, but in fact the world was penetrated by divine presence in all its parts. "Everything is filled with gods" as the famous saying put it. Some identified the world with God to the extent of not needing a doctrine of creation at all. Others, like Plato, believed that the world was created by someone, whom Plato called Father, or Mind (*nous*) or Creator (*demiourgos*) and who made the best possible world — not absolutely perfect, to be sure — given the fact that it is a world made from matter and enclosed in space, which inevitably acted as limitations upon the creator. Thus the material world, in the Platonic view of things, is good and beautiful, yet only insofar as it partakes of the absolute goodness and beauty which is to be found outside this material world, in the world of ideas to which we can ascend through contemplation and intellectual *katharsis*, moving from the sensible to the spiritual, to the ideal world. Pure Platonism took a positive view of the material universe as a means providing us with a ladder to ascend higher; it was Neoplatonism a little later that showed a distrust for the material world, and regarded it negatively.

Now, the Church did not react to platonism in the same polemical way as it did to Gnosticism. She seemed to like the idea that the world was attributed to a "creator" (called even the Father-God by Plato) and some of her greatest theologians such as St Justin in the second century, came out strongly in favour of Plato on almost all counts, including creation. Yet it would be a mistake to regard the Church of the first centuries as having accepted the Platonic or the ancient Greek view of the world, for the differences were very deep, and relate directly to the subject we are discussing in this series of lectures. Let us consider them briefly.

II. Creation with a "beginning"

If we look carefully into the issues that divided the Church from ancient Greek philosophy as a whole on the subject of creation, we can perhaps locate the heart of the problem and the crucial difference in the question of whether the world has had a *beginning* or not. This question, as we shall try to show in this lecture, has such far reaching implications, that it can be said to constitute one of the most important aspects of the relation between Christian theology and the ecological problem.

That the world had a beginning in any absolute sense of the world seemed to be utter nonsense and absurdity to all ancient Greek thinkers. As Professor Richard Sorabji (of this university) states in his well-known study *Time, Creation and the Continuum* the view that the universe has had a beginning "was denied by everybody in European antiquity outside the Judeo-Christian tradition" (p.193). For all ancient Greeks the world was eternal. One may argue that Plato in his *Timaeus* (the famous work that deals with creation) accepts the idea of beginning in creation, but the fact is that this beginning, as indeed all notions of beginning in ancient Greek thought, was not absolute, since it always presupposed something from which the world (or anything for that matter) was created. In the case of Plato's *Timaeus* this presupposed "something" which the creator used in order to create the world was *matter, ideas* and even *space* (*chora*), all of which acted as conditions limiting the creator's freedom. Creation was therefore beginningless, and the world, although particular beings in it could be said to have beginnings, the world taken as a whole had no beginning.

The Church and the Fathers reacted negatively to this view. They felt that it limited God's freedom in creating, since He had to work with pre-existing matter and other conditions. It also made God and the world somehow eternally co-existent. They had, therefore, to modify Platonism in this respect if they were to remain in some sense "Christian Platonists." Such a modification had already been made through what we call "Middle Platonism" (the Platonic Schools of the first two centuries AD before Neoplatonism appeared in the third century) and with the famous Jewish philosopher of Alexandria in the first century AD, Philo. The modification involved the rejection of the idea that matter was not created by God, and the suggestion that Plato's ideas on the basis of which God formed creation were thoughts in the mind of God. This modification removed to a large extent the crudest aspects of PlatoÆs doctrine of creation, and those most provocative to the Christian mind, but still left enough to make Platonism unacceptable to the Church on this subject. Where did the problem lie?

The real problem became evident when Christian Platonists such as Origen in Alexandria (third century) put forth the view of an eternal creation on the basis of the belief mentioned above that the ideas or logoi with which the world was created were thoughts in the mind of God, and in order to answer the question "how could God be almighty eternally, if he had no world on which to exercise His power?" This not only led Origen to the view, officially condemned by the Church a few centuries later, that souls were eternally pre-existing, but it also

showed clearly the dangers involved in any doctrine of creation which does not presuppose a radical and absolute beginning. As the late Father G. Florovsky put it, Origen's doctrine of creation implied that besides God there was always, eternally, a non-ego, a non-God, which meant that God was a creator by necessity and not freely. Unless He created the world God would remain unfulfilled, He would not be God. The notion of God and the notion of creation thus overlap, and Paganism makes its appearance disguised under the form of Christian doctrine.

Thus, the idea that the world has had a beginning ought to be taken in an absolute sense. But how could this absolute sense be described? And how could it make "sense" and not lead to absurdity as the ancient Greeks thought? Above all how does such an idea of absolute beginning affect our existence in this world and eventually the world's fate? These are questions to which we shall now turn.

III. Creation "out of nothing"

The idea that the world had an absolute beginning could only be expressed through the formula that the world was created "out of nothing," *ex nihilo*. But what does "nothing" mean in this case? Can there ever be something out of nothing? The ancient Greeks replied categorically in the negative. Christians had to find ways of making sense of this statement. Some of these ways did not always maintain the absolute character of nothingness, but succumbed indirectly to the logic of Greek thought which could not accept this idea and found it absurd. Such an understanding of "out of nothing" is to be found already in the Neoplatonists who understood it in the sense that a beginningless creation could be produced by God without its coming out of anything. Thomas Aquinas in the Middle Ages gave a meaning to "nothing" which amounted more or less to a source out of which creation came, while Karl Barth in our time, if studied carefully, seems to understand "nothing" as a sort of void which God *rejected* in opting for Christ pre-eternally as the one in whom and through whom He created the world. All these interpretations of "out of nothing" should not be confused with what St Irenaeus and other Church Fathers meant by it. The purpose of this expression for them was to indicate that nothing at all existed previously to creation, no factor whatsoever apart from God's free will was at work or contributed in any way towards the creation of the world.

In order to make sense of this understanding of "out of nothing" the ancient Christian theologians had to make one thing clear: time and space are categories which come into being *together with creation*. It is meaningless to ask "what did God do before creating," for there is no such thing as "before" and "after" until creation. Time and space are notions that have to do with beginning, and whatever had no beginning could not be measured with such categories. Thus, it seems that by accepting the view that the world had a beginning the Christians opted for a notion of time which: (a) is tied up with space organically — something that Platonism, for example, could not consider; and (b) characterises exclusively the created world — as space does too — and together with space affects the existence of the universe throughout and decisively. There is no way, therefore, for the world to escape from space and time or from the pre-condition of beginning which lies behind its being. Created being by definition is subject to these conditions, which not only mark the difference between God and the world, created and uncreated being, but also determine the world existentially. It is to the existential conditions of being created out of nothing that we shall now turn our attention, for they have to do directly with our subject.

What does being created our of nothing imply existentially? How does the world "experience," so to say, the fact that it had a beginning? We can reply briefly to this question by making the following points:

a) If we take the world as a "whole," as an entity in itself, which we *can* do if we regard it, as we do, as *finite* and as *other* than God, the fact that the world had a beginning forces us to put a line of demarcation, a point of departure, at least at its beginning. A classical logical axiom would oblige us to put a line of demarcation, a stopping point also at the end, for according to this axiom whatever has had a beginning will also have an end. But even leaving aside this axiom, the idea of *finitude* attached to that of creaturehood by definition implies that in the very concept of creaturehood there lies together with the idea of the beginning, also that of the end. All this means that creation *taken in itself* (this condition is of decisive importance for, as we shall see, things are different if creation is not taken "in itself") constitutes an entity surrounded and conditioned by *nothing*: It came from nothing and will return to nothing.

   I have called this implication of creaturehood "existential" not because I have in mind certain modern philosophical schools that bear this name, but because there is in fact no other way for us to speak of the universe except by somehow personifying it and attributing to it categories stemming from our experience. We cannot, for example, avoid associating the disappearances of a certain thing with the experience of death, and vice-versa the experience of death with the disappearance, the extinction of something. If the universe is conceivable as a finite particular entity the very possibility of conceiving it in our minds implies putting lines of demarcation around it. But lines of demarcation allowing for the conception mentally, imply existentially the experience of a before and an after, the experience of the beginning and the end of the thing conceived, therefore something analogous to the experience of the birth as well as the death of something. In this way of speaking, therefore, that the world had an absolute beginning implies that taken in itself it hangs in a void, and cannot avoid the threat of death. The universe is not eternal either in terms of its beginning or in terms of its end; it is mortal, and mortality in this case is as absolute as the use of the term "nothing" — it signifies total extinction.

b) If we do not take the world as a whole, as an entity in itself, but look instead at its interior, at what happens, so to say, inside it, we observe the same consequences of the fact that it has come into being out of nothing. Just as the world in its totality has had a beginning, so

also each particular being that makes it up is conditioned by a beginning which threatens it with extinction. The space-time structure of the universe is "experienced" by everything and everyone in the world as the means by which entities acquire their being and at the same time their non-being. My father was united with me through time, and through the same time he is divided from me by his death. The same space that unites me with you at this moment also separates me from you. Things are brought together and are separated by the same means. Space and time are the exclusive characteristics of creation, and this is expressed in every simple being that can be said to have an identity of its own. No individual thing can exist without space and time (cf. P.F. Strawson's *Individuals*), and this —unless space and time were always there, i.e. unless they were beginningless — proves them in the end to be non-entities.

One could say, therefore, that the nothingness out of which the world came into being permeates it and affects every single being within the universe. Death is experienced as return to nothingness, in spite of the fact that new entities may emerge out of the old ones that died. For neither can the fact that species procreate change the fact that a concrete progenitor A no longer exists after his death as a particular identity, nor, worse even, the can return of a corpse to the earth in order to become the basic natural elements for other forms of life be a consolation for the loss of a particular being. Death amounts to the extinction of particular beings precisely because the world having come out of nothing and being penetrated by it does not possess any means *in its nature* whereby to overcome nothingness. Plato had to make use of the idea of immortality as a *natural* characteristic of the soul in order to secure the overcoming of death in the universe, and Aristotle having at some point denied this belief of his master had to rely on the immortality of the species through pro-creation. In these ways the world as a whole would achieve immortality, yet at the expense of particular beings. But a Christian? What could a Christian do to secure the overcoming of death as extinction of the particular beings, given the fact that there was no eternal and immortal element in the nature of creation, all of them — including souls, species and matter — having had a beginning? It is tragic, but once we accept the doctrine of creation out of nothing we are unable to find anything in this world that is not subject to death, and — what is even more significant — we cannot understand death as anything less than total extinction. Here I find the words of Unamuno, quoted by Professor Sorabji in his book which I mentioned earlier, to be quite revealing:

> "For myself I can say that as a youth and even as a child I remained unmoved when shown the most moving pictures of hell, for even then nothing appeared quite so horrible to me as nothingness."

These words may easily be taken as sheer psychologizing and therefore dismissed by hard thinking. But the psychological aspects of death — which may or may not play an important role depending on the particular individual and his mood at the time — is not all there is in the quotation. This quotation conveys faithfully the message of Christian theology that the world as a whole, like every part of it, exists under the threat of nothingness, because it was created out of nothing in the absolute sense of the word. The world possesses no natural power in itself which would enable it to overcome this situation, for if it did it would have been immortal and eternal by nature; it would have had no beginning in the absolute sense as the ancient Greeks rightly observed. A Christian who wishes to have both his doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* and a faith that the world possesses in its nature some kind of means for eternal survival is bound to be logically inconsistent. For what such a view would imply is that the eternal God created an eternal world, i.e. another God by nature, which amounts to the total denial of the doctrine of creation out of nothing and a the same time to the abolition of the distinction between created and uncreated being — a distinction on which the entire Patristic tradition insisted so much.

IV. Conclusion

Now, in saying all of this I can sense the reaction coming to the minds of some of you: if things are the way we have described them here, does this mean that the world was created by God in order to disappear one day? Was God so cruel as to bring about beings other than Himself without taking any measures to secure their survival? Do we not believe in a God who is "the God not of the dead but of the living" and who loves the world to the point of wanting it to share His own life and bliss?

Of course, all of this is true. But the question is *how* did God want the world to survive and share His own life? And, theologically speaking, the question is how to state all this in a way that does not involve logical contradictions or stumble on fundamental scientific facts, which would exclude theology from normal scientific or philosophical discourse. For it is easy for theology to speak its own language to its own people and thus form an esoteric ghetto of its own. But we have started here with the assumption that theology can offer something to man in his attempt to face a crisis created by culture, including science and philosophy. We intend to stick to this assumption in spite of the limitations to our dealing adequately with such a vast and difficult problem. We, therefore, wish to articulate Christian theology in a way that would be *faithful to the logical consequences of its own assumptions*, and not contradict them.

Thus, it is an assumption, a doctrine of the Church, that the world was created out of nothing in the absolute sense of the term, a doctrine that distinguished Christianity from ancient Pagan religions and philosophies. The fact that in our time natural science does not find it inconceivable that the world was created out of absolute nothing can be a positive factor in enabling theology to enter into constructive discourse with the scientist. But even if the scientist were to disagree about this doctrine, the Christian theologian having accepted it in the first instance, would have to be logically consistent with it. This consistency will have to be observed also in trying to answer the question: how did God envisage the survival of the world given the fact that He created it out of nothing?

We have already noted that it would be inconsistent to assume that God endowed the world with a natural capacity for survival, for such an assumption would imply

that between God and the world there is a natural affinity (a *syggeneia* as the ancient Greeks would say). Anything *naturally* common between God and Creation would make the two realities one in a substantial way. This is why the Fathers had to reject the Neoplatonic idea of emanations, the Platonic and Origenist idea of the eternity of souls, the Aristotelian view of the eternity of matter, etc. It is a matter of logical consistency to seek the survival of creation in ways other than these.

But if we exclude the assumption that the world possesses in its nature some factor securing its survival, and still want to secure this survival, we are left only with one solution: we must find a way of uniting the world with God, the only eternal and immortal being, other than a *natural* affinity. We must find a link between the two which would secure the communication of life between them without abolishing the natural otherness between God and Creation. Can such a link be found? And can such a linkage make any sense?

Christian doctrine offers as a solution to this problem the place of Man in creation. It is in the human being that we must seek the link between God and the world, and it is precisely this that makes Man responsible, in a sense the only being responsible for the fate of creation. What an awful responsibility and what a glorious mission at the same time! "Man is the glory of God" declares St Irenaeus, and with good reason. But why and how can Man be the solution to the problem of the survival of creation? What qualities does he possess enabling him to achieve this? And why has he failed in this mission? These are questions we shall attempt to discuss in our next lecture.