

Analysis of the importance of the dogma of the creation of the world 'out of nothing' for theology in general and the ecological problems in contemporary society

Fr. John Athanasiou

Introduction

The dogma of creation of the world 'out of nothing,' is incomprehensible to the scientific mind that explains the material world in reference to its cause and effect, and to its previous physicality. The leap of this dogma is to declare that God did not create from pre-existing matter, but that creation came from the divine energies in accordance with the divine ideas and divine will.

This essay will expound this dogma and refer to its importance for theology in general. It will then focus on contemporary society and attendant ecological problems as a measure of our understanding, before suggesting a solution for healing and reconciliation by humankind towards our creator.

Caveats

When referring to the creation process in the Bible it should be remembered that the Bible is a human attempt to describe the workings of the infinite God. Humans are limited by finite understanding to express this awesome process. Accordingly, we should be on guard to correct any anthropomorphic bias we may form about God by appealing to apophatic principles. As Lossky puts it 'It is by unknowing (αγνωσία) that one may know Him who is above every possible object of knowledge.'¹

Further, creation should be thought of not in the past tense as a historical fact but in the continuous present tense. Henesy² aptly illustrates this by referring to God singing the song of Creation. Whilst God continues to sing, the created world continues to exist. However, if God stops, we cease our being – yet God continues being.

The Dogma

Although the act of creation 'out of nothing' has few direct references in the Bible³, it reveals profound understanding of the relationship of God and his creation. Creation itself is described in the first book of Moses commonly known as Genesis (Gen 1: 1-2.9) with further insight added by John's Gospel (Jn 1:1-3).

A careful consideration of the biblical date referred to in the light of the above caveats allow for a number of propositions to be drawn in relation to God and man, the centre of his creation.

For God, we proffer the five following propositions for creation:

1. A reading of both John's Gospel and Genesis allows a conclusion that God is one in essence yet Trinitarian in hypostases, all of which participated in the creation;
2. Given that God created out of things that did not exist implies that God had a choice to create or not. That he created, means he acted with absolute freedom whatever he willed and out of absolute love;
3. God did not create out of his essence or else all creation would be immortal. That we are surrounded by death and decay is evidence of this;
4. God was, then creation began. Therefore, God is transcendent. With creation began the notion of time. That he is continuously and intimately involved in his creation means he is also imminent and with us in time; and
5. God created the spiritual and material world, and that the process of creation culminated in man who was a microcosm in unifying the spiritual and the physical. This creation is described as 'very, very good' (Gen 1:31).

For humankind, we may offer the following four propositions in relation to their role in creation:

1. That we were each created in the image and likeness of God. Thus, man is seen in a personal relationship with God who can 'control nature in assimilating it to its divine Archetype';⁴
2. God, by breathing life into man (Gen 2:7), gave to him a soul, which is unique to each created individual;
3. God gave to man dominion over all the earth (Gen 1:28) and the right to name every living creature (Gen 2:19); and
4. God, by making man last, confirmed that the rest of creation was for mankind's benefit.

The Importance of the Dogma

There are a number of profound propositions that follow from the dogma of 'creation' ex nihilo.

The phrase 'in the beginning' (Gen 1:1) implies an end as well. Indeed, the Genesis creation is mirrored in Revelation, an eschatological text where God in creating a new heaven and a new earth proclaims 'behold, I make all things new' (Rev 21:5) and 'it is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end' (Rev 21:6). Thus, there is a divine plan, with a sacred balance that creation is following to the end whatever that end may be.

Further, this divine plan, including the various theophanies and the presence of Jesus Christ, was fully developed at creation. Hence the psalmist can refer to God's perfect knowledge of man even before he was born (Psalm 138). Moreover, all human knowledge including that yet to be discovered was placed into the divine plan by God at the time of creation. Hence, any new discovery by humankind is no more than a step towards realising the plenitude of the plan of God. This plan is revealed in God's own choosing. Thus it is written 'there is nothing new under the sun.' (Eccl 1 :9)

God's creation as 'very, very good' (Gen 1:31) precludes the notion of evolution, which is wasteful and contrary to notions of absolute love and of divine ideas. That there are changes to environment and loss and even deterioration of species is as a result of mankind's abuse of the environment resulting in loss of the sacred balance. A degradation of nature, thus, can occur. However, to suggest that this is the creation of something new as the evolutionists contend is to permit the creation (nature) to become the creator (God), which notion is nonsensical.

The Ecological Problems Today

It would appear that just as each person is capable of exercising their will for good, they can exercise it for ill. God does not tell us what to do so wherever or whenever we are born; we live our life as we want. It is this very freedom that is exercised selfishly that leads to apostasy between humankind and God. This exercise of misdirected will led to the fall of the first man, Adam.

Further, in the incarnation of Christ and through his resurrection, humankind knows that the divine plan is salvific, and as such holds the truth to eternal life - provided we are prepared to recognise and act upon this. Unfortunately for most, the rejection of the creator leads to the rejection of his creation, hence leading to abuse towards the world.

What of the World? One needs to look around at the magnitude of abuse. We despise fellow human beings as different or dangerous or as things to be exploited. In short, we fail to see that in the divine will the very people we despise are of equal worth and validity to God as ourselves. Our sin lies in thinking of life in terms of me and them, thus focusing on differences rather than considering life as an 'us exercise.'

Humankind is ravaging God's creation. Species, each one uniquely made, are disappearing. Unfortunately, we equate dominion of creation with domination of creation. The environment is being radically altered. Individual or collective national greed rules. So long as some disaster

happens to someone else or some other country it is generally ignored. What we fail to do is see that it affects us all, as we are all elements of one creation.

Everything is interconnected and a hurt inflicted upon creation is suffered by all. Thus, we do not stop to think that we Christians who are three times better off than our non-Christian neighbours⁵ do nothing about this. Which of us is prepared to reduce our standard of living so another unique human being in a third world country can live better? That there is gross inequality amongst mankind and indifference to the rest of creation through exploitation amply demonstrates our failure to date to come to terms with our cosmic role in the divine plan.

The Solution

What can we do? Chryssavgis sums it up thus:

Unless we entertain and joyfully enter into this interdependence of all persons and all things in what. ... Maximus calls the cosmic liturgy, we cannot hope to resolve issues of economy and ecology⁶

Thus, the first step is to see God in all things and all things within God. In other words, our mindset turns to God and away from ourselves. As soon as we do that, we begin to see the entire creation as sacred. We take on a panentheistic view of the world. We become aware of the sacred balance of life and our mission to love God and to so grow towards him.

To achieve this, we need to recognise the world as Church and see the Church as communion where the Holy Spirit visits at liturgy. Indeed, our vision should be of life as a continuous liturgy that demands we stop and give praise in awe of the mystery of God.

How do we hear this continuous liturgy and thus recognise our responsibilities? Bishop Kallistos uses trees to make the point that:

Nature is sacred. The world is a sacrament of the divine presence, a means of communion with God. The environment consists not in dead matter but in living relationship. The entire cosmos is one vast burning bush, permeated by the face of the divine power and glory.¹⁷

The first step towards God must be repentance. To fully repent we must see ourselves for what we are, and be prepared to change and recognise the cosmic in all things, and all things in the cosmic. Hence, we begin to see ourselves not as owners of things but as stewards with a clear purpose. Our stewardship requires an understanding that God conferred creation as a free gift. Thus, we need to recognise our talents as gifts, and as his creation, rejoice in sharing and conserving out of love for our creator.

The second step is to practice and put into place our transfiguration. We can see all creation as beautiful and 'very, very good'. (Gen 1:31) This change in world view means we want to conserve and indeed apportion, so justice can be done to my neighbour, whoever he may be, in like measure as to myself.

Thirdly, we must learn to slow down and hear God's voice. Once we hear him, his Grace can be permitted by us to enter and transfigure our lives, thus allowing us to partake in his promise.

Conclusion

Humans have the awesome stewardship for all of creation. Our understanding of the role that we have in this creation depends on our being receptive to the revelations provided by God. That we may not yet have come to terms with our role in creation is evidenced by the ecological problems in contemporary society.

ENDNOTES

1 Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1991), p. 25

2 Michael Henesy, *Len Chimbley's Dream: Questions and Answers about God*. (St Louis, MO: Liguori Publications, 1989)

3 2 Macc 7:28; Heb 11:3 (RSV)

4 Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1991), p. 120

5 John Chryssavgis, *Beyond the Shattered Image*. (Minneapolis, MN: Light & Life Publishing Co, 1999), p. 4

6 Ibid, p. 6

7 Kallistos (Bishop of Diokleia), *Through the Creation to the Creator*. (Royal Institution of Great Britain, 1995)

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