

Towards a Modern Presentation of the Mystery of Creation

J. JOSÉ ALVIAR

Man is a being who seeks for meaning. *Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I headed?* These basic questions arise perennially in his spirit, and render him restless until he arrives at the suitable answers. *Is existence the fruit of blind forces at work in the universe, a matter of pure statistical probability, or the result of an intelligent design?* Depending on the answers to such queries, man's understanding of himself takes on a greater or lesser profundity.

The Judaeo-Christian reply points unhesitatingly to another Being, distinct from and higher than man, as the ultimate explanation of all existence: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." (*Gen 1, 1*) "I believe in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth" (*Apostolic Creed*). These pronouncements, situated at the very beginning of the Bible and of the Symbol of Faith, seem intended to indicate to man from the outset the mental framework within which he must seek the answers to his fundamental questions.

Such a revelation proved surprising to the ancient Hellenic world, so accustomed to thinking of a *cosmos* with its harmonic cycles, and thus of a universe that seemed always to have been there, without beginning or end. Jews and, later, Christians would defend a different world-view, imbued with the dramatic idea of a history which does not repeat itself, of real time that began to flow from God's initial action and is punctuated by *kairoi* or decisive moments of divine intervention. "Nothing comes from nothing," went the old Eleatic axiom; "every finite being comes from nothing, and remains in existence, by the power of the Infinite Being," affirmed Jews and Christians.

It is difficult to gauge the impact in human history of this new attitude. Once the universe and its natural forces had been "undivinized," reduced to the class of creatures, man looked only upward, at one transcendent Being that deserved total obeisance. All other intramundane realities, all laws and elements of nature, however wonderful, now appeared marked with creatureliness, and thus were treated with lesser awe. Man no longer felt imprisoned by anonymous or irrational forces (stars, destiny...), and as bearer of the mandate to "dominate the earth" (*Gen* 1:28) began gradually to impose his mind and will on nature. Perhaps, as some authors suggest,¹ this attitude towards nature became the seed of the scientific revolution that we continue to witness even in our day.

In these last decades this type of world-view has evolved further, as the natural sciences have progressed rapidly. On the one hand, some success in unifying theories of cosmic laws and forces has provided a more unitary picture of the universe. on the other hand, certain theories of matter auto-creating and auto-organizing itself, evolving upward in the scale of complexity until the level of intelligence, have pretended to render superfluous the notion of a transcendent causal explanation of the world: the cosmos, it is affirmed, is self-explanatory; matter and energy's appearance, the universe's configuration, life's production, and man's own entry into the picture are explicable in terms of world-immanent laws. At times all this is stated in disheartening terms, as when the notion of an intelligent **maker** is supplanted by that of fortuitous combinations of matter's elements: "You're here out of pure chance."

How to expound creation doctrine at the close of the 20th century, with its highly evolved world-view? In what terms may we express a truth that contains so decisive a reply to the problem of meaning? The intention of the present article is to discuss these questions, and to suggest possible approaches to a modern but faithful presentation of this mystery of the Christian faith.²

¹ Stanley Jaki, for instance.

² The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is a highly instructive example of how a modern explanation of Christian doctrine may be carried out. For a study of its methodology and content, see the numerous articles and commentaries published so far, one of them the *Introducción a la lectura del Catecismo de la Iglesia Católica*, (EUNSA, Pamplona: 1993), by a group of Theology professors of the University of Navarre.

Overview of Trends in Creation Thinking

In spite of recent conflicts in some areas (which we have mentioned above), creation thinking may be said to have undergone a gradual process of harmonization. Important substantial agreement has been attained, not only among biblical scholars and theologians, but also among physicists, biologists, etc., as to how the Biblical creation account should be interpreted, and related to data coming from the natural sciences. We shall focus on some aspects of creation theology in which a certain degree of unanimity may be said to have been achieved, as this will provide a suitable starting-ground for formulating the doctrine of creation.

Greater agreement on the interpretation of the creation accounts

Setting aside the relatively minor phenomenon of fundamentalism, which tends towards a too-literal interpretation of the Bible, we may affirm that Biblical scholars have arrived at a much greater agreement regarding the manner of interpreting Genesis' opening chapters. Pope Pius XII's affirmation half a century ago³ regarding the historical (but not Greek/Roman-historical) character of the chapters of Genesis, may now be appreciated as an early indication along this line on the part of the magisterium. The peculiar literary gender of these parts of the Bible is now commonly recognized. Genesis may indeed be denominated historical, in the sense that it reveals events that truly occurred: e.g. creation, elevation, fall, etc. Nevertheless, it expresses these truths in its own fashion, couching them in the language proper to the cultural and historical milieu of the epoch. A middle path must thus be trodden in interpreting its texts: the creation account may neither be taken as a totally literal description of what happened, nor as a purely legendary tale. Genesis simply belongs to a literary genre of its own, and care must be taken not to apply the category "historical" to it in a univocal sense.

With this exegetical principle in mind the interpretation of the account of Genesis becomes lightened of superfluous problems that were formerly so common to it. For instance, how could there be day-counts when the sun was created only on the fourth day? How did the

³ Cf. *Humani Generis* (Dz 2329).

serpent move about before it was condemned to crawl on its belly? Etc. Revelation's more essential lessons, which have to do more with man's salvation rather than the question of "how exactly" things occurred, may now be pinpointed with greater precision. The new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, for instance, enumerates the following key truths that may be extracted from the sacred texts:⁴ (1) God as the world's origin and end; (2) the order and goodness of created reality; (3) man's vocation to friendship with God; (4) the tragedy of sin; (5) the promise of salvation.

Within this perspective, the exact sequence and manner of appearance of cosmic constituents and of life-forms may be considered a matter of free discussion, even among believers. Did creation start with a Big Bang, or with a Slow Growth? Did plant species precede animal ones on earth? Did animal life begin in the oceans? To these and other similar questions Genesis is not expected to respond in detail, though biblical scholars and scientists might point out that the basic sequence found in the book strangely coincides with the proposals of modern cosmology and biology.

In this way the Genesis account becomes unburdened, as it should be, from an excessive dependence on the findings and theories of the empirical sciences. For instance: the truth that the universe had a beginning in time, and is traceable to God's free decision, is a perennially valid truth, situated on a plane above the variable tides of cosmological theories. If in the future scientists were to discover that there is enough total mass in the universe to slow down its expansion, finally to produce an involution to the point of a Big Crunch (disappearance?), and possibly afterwards a "new Big Bang", etc., all this "cycling" would not invalidate the revealed datum of the cosmos, radical beginning from God *at some point in time*.

Genesis, we may say, affirms something more relevant. It answers especially the question of meaning: the fact that we and the universe around us exist is a gratuitous reality, due to a loving decision of the Supreme Being. God, "before" time's commencement, lived in solitude and plenitude, and could have remained thus without creatures. His exuberant love, however, led Him freely to educe out of nothingness⁵ a

⁴ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 289.

⁵ *Ex nihilo*, as the Fourth Lateran Council states (Dz 428).

host of beings capable of sharing His beatitude. At the base of all finite existence, therefore, we discover the double mark of nothingness and purpose. On the one hand we contemplate ourselves as creatures drawn from the abyss of non-being, and thus with a radical "nothingness" at the heart of our existence. On the other hand, we are comforted by the knowledge that our actual existing is traceable to an intelligent and loving design of God; we are therefore not simple victims of a blind process that "casts" beings into existence in an uncaring world.

These are lessons of vital importance, for they lead Christians to confront their existence, however hard, with confidence. Even the harshest of experiences, physical or moral, may be borne serenely thanks to the conviction of the existence of meaning in everything. As St. Augustine says, "God would never permit evil to exist if He were not sufficiently powerful and good to draw good out of it."⁶

Frontiers with the natural sciences

The natural sciences, which have advanced so spectacularly in recent decades, have ever constituted a partner-in-dialogue for the Christian doctrine of creation. This frontier meeting, generally fruitful, has on certain occasions taken on the nature of a debate; for instance, the rise of the theory of evolution in the 19th century led to a confrontation between "creationists" and "evolutionists", and in more recent times radical trends in biblical exegesis (fundamentalism) and in evolutionism (atheistic evolutionism) have sparked similar interdisciplinary disputes.

In spite of these occasional "frontier clashes", however, it may be affirmed that, thanks to the progress in both theological and natural sciences, a more peaceful tendency is imposing itself at the boundaries of these fields of knowledge. This is partly due to a sounder appreciation of the scope and limits of the diverse sciences involved. The natural sciences and theology, while both representing quests for truth, operate from diverse viewpoints, and meet with reality at different levels.⁷ Cosmic physics may propose a picture of the universe a

⁶ Enchiridion, 11, 3.

⁷ See the important discourses of Pope John Paul II to the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, in relation with the Galileo case (Oct. 31, 1992).

millionth of a second after the Big Bang; or calculate the huge amount of energy (infinite?) required to produce the universe; it cannot say Who or why. Theology, for its part, draws from Revelation answers to these latter questions; but it cannot supplant the human sciences, with their empirical findings and discovered laws, to supply a detailed physical picture of the universe.⁸

This mutual respect and complementarity between Christian doctrine and the natural sciences is proving especially fruitful in two frontier areas that refer to "the beginnings": (1) the primitive structuring of the cosmos; (2) the appearance of life, particularly human life, on earth. In both these sectors the old disjunction, "*Creation or evolution?*," is now generally discarded as superfluous, for the two concepts are understood as not necessarily opposed.⁹ The former type of world-view, partly due to a more literal interpretation of the Genesis account, attributed the appearance of heavenly bodies and living species to a series of spectacular interventions of God, producing all cosmic and life forms in a span of six days; the picture was somewhat like that of house-building and decoration. Further understanding of the fundamental physical and chemical laws that govern the combination of matter's constituents, the discovery of extinguished primitive life-forms, and a more detailed knowledge of the dynamism of life's genetic history, suggest another possible picture of cosmic history.

Without necessarily eliminating the earlier alternative mentioned above —a view the Church has not condemned—, a gradual picture might also be espoused, in which a stepwise organization of material elements takes place, from subparticles to dust clouds to galactic systems, from inert to replicative molecules, from non-intelligent to potentially intelligent life forms, all in processes that span millions of years. Obviously, the most that a biologist or chemist can do is to propose the *how*, e.g. suggest the physical or chemical phenomena behind the transition from free quarks to protons, or the leap from inert to living stuff; he cannot, by an invalid extrapolation, atheistically

⁸ Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 35.

⁹ An early book that soundly reformulates the dilemma "creation-evolution" is the one written by Otto Semmelroth, *Die Welt als Schöpfung* (Frankfurt am Main, 1963).

deny the existence of a transcendent Author of material laws, or the reality of a design behind cosmic processes.¹⁰

Thus the Christian believer, while bound to uphold the revealed truths regarding creation, still enjoys vast areas of freedom when it comes to imagining God's precise actuation to produce the universe's configuration and the different species of life. Did the Maker intervene in a direct fashion to provoke the agglomeration of atoms, of stars, of galaxies, or did he leave the four basic forces —gravitation, electromagnetism, strong nuclear force, weak nuclear force— to shape the universe? Did the Creator intervene in the biochemistry of the primitive oceans to facilitate the appearance of DNA strands, or was this simply due to the innate combinant tendencies He Himself authored in carbon, oxygen, hydrogen, nitrogen, sulfur atoms? Did God produce a sudden evolution in a subhuman adult to produce the first human being, or did He inscribe in living materials a natural evolutionary tendency that finally yielded, through genetic mutation, the first being potentially capable of receiving a human soul?

Christian teaching does not side indissolubly with any of these replies. It simply tells us that we must hold on to certain immovable truths: (1) Whatever order, laws and harmony exist in the universe are due to God;¹¹ therefore, all physical laws and biochemical processes that might conduce to higher orders of existence are due, in the final analysis, to a transcendent Intelligence, not just to simple, blind chance; (2) When it comes to the human person, we must uphold that the spiritual component comes from God and is not "produced" by the parents; that the novelty in the production of a new human —and *a fortiori* of the first human— cannot be explained exclusively as the fruit of an evolutionary process, since a radically humanizing and spiritualizing principle must come from a source transcending matter.¹² Certainly, mutations in the DNA chain may conceivably produce, from two subhuman parents, an embryo potentially apt to be informed by a spiritual soul; but this material process remains insufficient to

¹⁰ For instance, Carl Sagan's atheistic Introduction to S. Hawkins's book, *A Brief History of Time* (New York, 1988), is not borne out by the statements of Hawkins himself.

¹¹ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 229.

¹² Cf. *Humani Generis* (Dz 2327).

account for the presence of a vital principle that in many ways (intelligence, free will) is clearly independent of matter.

Link between creation and salvation

Another theological current which has enriched creation thinking in recent times is the appreciation of the intimate link existing between creation and salvation. Salvation history is thus no longer portrayed in such a clear-cut, two-step fashion as before, with creation as the first act, followed by the "correcting," redeeming intervention of Christ, to undo the tragedy Adam and Eve had wrought —a sort of error-and-erase procedure. The prevailing view now, rather, is that of a unitary, eternal design of God, aimed from the beginning at divinizing man in Christ, and thus historically weaving a drama of a Fall-that-brings-the-Word-Incarnate-as-Savior. Creation and salvation become inextricably intertwined in this portrait; the former action is seen as the initiation of God's loving plan for man's beatitude.¹³ The fall of the first humans, though tragic, appears as yet part of a wiser, grander design of God, to configure men according to the image to His Son —thus leading the Church exuberantly to proclaim *Felix culpa!* in its Easter vigil liturgy.

Christological / pneumatological components of the Mystery of Creation

Recent developments in Trinitarian theology have likewise contributed to an enhanced reflection on creation. Earlier treatises on the act of creation used to accentuate the unicity of the divine agent: only one Supreme Being is responsible for all, not two creators —one good, one bad—, nor a demiurge that mediates between an all-transcendent Being and the material world. This tenet of oneness, while true,¹⁴ must yet be informed and transformed by the New Testament's trinitarian datum: for the one God we profess is, in His deepest reality, Three Persons. In consequence, the principle —shared with theodicy or natural theology— that in all divine actions *ad extra* it is the divine

¹³ Cf. M. Flick - Z. Alszegehy, *Il Creatore. L'inizio della salvezza*. (Florence, 1964).

¹⁴ The Trinity acts as *unum principium* when creating, declares the Fourth Lateran Council (Dz 428).

essence common to Three that produces the effect, must be balanced with a tri-personal dimension, if the mystery of the creative act is to be appreciated in all its depth. Creation is the work of three distinct Persons, acting together. That there is only one Creator, God, was a truth the people of Israel already professed; that creation is the work of the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit, is a specifically Christian confession.

It is thus that modern investigation on the creative role of the Word, or Wisdom, or the Son, in Biblical passages,¹⁵ and the analogous role of the Spirit of God,¹⁶ has led to accentuate the three-personal dimension of the creational act. The Father, as St. Irenaeus stated graphically centuries ago, is the Creator who made all things through the Son and the Spirit, as though they were His two hands.¹⁷

This trinitarian portrayal, while respecting the tenet of unicity of the divine action, permits a deeper comprehension of salvation history's posterior unfolding. If the world was created according to the Father's mind, expressed in the Subsistent Word, it appears reasonable that this Word should assume a central role in revealing the Truth to man, incarnating as Jesus Christ.¹⁸ Similarly, if finite creation is an overflowing of God's love, it seems logical that the Holy Spirit, infinite love-gift shared between Father and Son, should be attributed the task of transforming men through sanctity, to unite them with the divinity.

Revelation's lessons are both old and new. God's saving message remains substantially unchanged in its flow through history, but its passage through changing cultural milieus demands fresh thinking from each Christian generation, so as to include new viewpoints and express the perennial in accessible terms. The succinct description of modern creation thinking offered in the present article illustrates this dynamic process. Hopefully, further reflection and study will be undertaken on the origin of man and the cosmos.

¹⁵ Some of the more relevant passages are cited in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn. 291-292: Gen 1:2-3; Ps 33,6; Jn 1:1-3; Col 1:16-17.

¹⁶ Cf. *Ibidem*. In n.292 the Catechism also cites important liturgical testimonies on the Holy Spirit's creative role: the Nicene Creed; the hymn "Veni Creator Spiritus"; the Byzantine liturgy.

¹⁷ Cf. *Adv. haer.* 4,20,1.

¹⁸ Cf. *Dei Verbum*, n.2; *Gaudium et Spes*, nn. 10 and 22.