

MAÑANA

Christian Theology
from a Hispanic Perspective

Justo L. González

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Creator of Heaven and Earth

The Apostles' Creed, which affirms belief in God the Parent all-ruling—*pantokrator*—also affirms that this God is the Creator of heaven and earth. Since we are part of creation and it is within creation that our entire existence takes place, it is important that we explore the significance of that creedal statement.

The Goodness of Creation

The first obvious consequence of the doctrine of creation is that the creature has a positive value. The early church insisted that God is “all-ruling” and “maker of heaven and earth” precisely because there were those who denied this. Heaven and earth are not the result of an error or sin. They are the result of the will of God. As Genesis repeatedly states, when God made each thing, “God saw that it was good.”

Thus the doctrine of creation is first of all an affirmation of the positive value of the world, and a rejection of any doctrine or theory that diminishes or denies that value. Christians, like others, have often been tempted to flee to an otherworldly religion. But the doctrine of creation affirms that *this* is the world God made and declared to be good. One can certainly say—one must certainly say—that it is tainted by sin. But there is no other world, no other cosmos, than this heaven and earth that God has made. To flee from it as if there were some other reality is not only a mistake; it is also an impossibility.

The created cosmos, in which we must exist and of which we are part, includes “heaven and earth.” Too often this is interpreted to mean that beyond this passing “earth,” tainted by sin and temporality, there is an eternal “heaven,” unblemished and unfading. It is on this basis that

Christian escapism usually functions, inviting people to flee from the cares of this earth and look to the heavenly rewards. But the fact of the matter is that according to Scripture both heaven and earth are temporal creations of God, both will equally pass, and both are tainted by sin. The notion that earth below is a passing "vale of tears" and that heaven above is an abiding place of pure bliss is not warranted by Scripture. In Luke 10:18, Jesus tells his disciples that, at the time of their preaching and presumably as the result of it, he saw Satan fall from heaven. In Revelation 12, the "great red dragon" is in heaven, and the reason for the present woes on earth is precisely that the devil has been expelled from heaven, which until now has been his abode. Finally, at the end of the same book, we are promised not only a new earth, but also a new heaven.

That God is creator of "heaven and earth" means also that we are part of creation. In the next chapter we shall explore further the meaning of our humanity. But here it may be useful to remind ourselves that we do not stand outside of creation. We cannot escape the created order precisely because we too are creatures. It is here, in this created cosmos, both on earth and in heaven, that we are to live and to serve God.

Creation Is Not God

The second consequence of the doctrine of creation is that God and creation are two distinct realities. The one does not flow naturally from the other, nor does the other lead simply and directly to the one. As the theologians of the fourth century put it, creation is not of the "essence" but of the "will" of God. This became important at the time as a manner of affirming that the Word of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, is divine. The cosmos, they said, is "made" or "created" and is the result of the "will" of God. The Word, on the other hand, is "begotten, not made" and "of the essence of the Father"—both phrases from the Nicene Creed. Creation does not flow from God's substance, like the series of emanations that the Neoplatonists posited.

If creation were a series of emanations from the divine substance, it would be hierarchically ordered, with some creatures by their very nature standing closer to God than others. But creation is not an emanation of the divine substance. It is rather the result of the sovereign divine will. Creatures are not ordered in such a way that by their very nature they stand at various distances from God. Ontologically, every created being is infinitely distant from the being of God.

The view that there is a hierarchy of being and that as one climbs along that hierarchy one approaches God was very prevalent during the Middle Ages. Partly through the influence of Pseudo-Dionysius, who was thought to have been a direct disciple of the Apostle Paul, all reality was seen as a series of ordered hierarchies, and the goal of the Christian life was precisely to ascend along those hierarchies. Many of the great classics of Christian mysticism, such as Bonaventure's *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, are built on this premise. Such a view of the cosmos and its order, however, stands closer to the Neoplatonic theory of emanation than to the Christian doctrine of creation.

The significance of this is that God is not reached, so to speak, by climbing to the highest point of creation. The baals of the Older Testament were to be found on the hilltops. The God of Israel speaks on Mount Sinai, but also in the lowlands of Egypt and Babylon. And what is true in geographical terms is also true in terms of ontological and social standing.

When it comes to social standing, the God of Israel speaks to King David and King Solomon on their thrones, but also to Amos among the shepherds of Tekoa. God remains sovereign over creation, and one does not necessarily approach the Creator the more one advances along a supposed hierarchy of creatures, be that a geographical, ontological, ecclesiastical, or sociopolitical hierarchy.

Hispanics are well aware of this. In every human society there is a tendency to think that the "high and mighty" are closer to God. The church does not often escape from the same tendency. In the denomination to which I belong, this has led to the strange practice of naming churches after large donors—a practice that Christians in centuries past would have found shocking. (For this reason, very few United Methodist churches will ever be named after Hispanics or other minorities.) In every denomination, power and prestige in society at large translates into power and prestige in the church. It is as if a higher standing in the social hierarchy were an indication of a closer connection to God. Thus while we do not lift up our eyes to the holy places where the baals are worshiped, we are often invited, by the church itself, to lift up our eyes to the stories of success where today's baals are worshiped.

Creation, however, is not a hierarchical order that leads to the divine as a ladder leads to the attic. In the act of creation, God remains sovereign. The sovereign God who chooses to speak not in the mighty wind but in a whisper, not directly to King Jeroboam but to Amos among the shepherds of Tekoa, has also chosen to speak in a Galilean carpenter who makes the astonishing claim, "Who has seen me has seen the Father"—and who also says and repeats the astonishingly antihierarchi-

cal words, "The last shall be first" and "Among you the one who serves is the greatest."

To say that creation is good is to say that we cannot escape it, and should not even try to escape it. To say that it is not God is to say that its present order is not final.

Heaven and Earth

"Heaven and earth," says the Creed. This may be interpreted in a number of ways. It could mean simply the physical planet (earth) and everything that surrounds it (heaven). For our purposes, however, there is another dimension of this phrase that bears underlining. "Heaven and earth" means that this physical earth that we see—the planet Earth, the solar system, the galaxies, and all that space encompasses—is not the totality of creation. There is also "heaven," not in the sense of "a place up there" but rather in the sense of those dimensions of creation that our mind cannot encompass.¹

Here, we must avoid two positions that seem to be diametrically opposed to each other but that in truth often lead to the same practical consequences. The first is the escapist, spiritualizing position that has already been mentioned. From this perspective, there are two places, heaven and earth. Earth is the physical place where we live in bodies, and where events occur that have significance only inasmuch as they open or close the way to heaven. Heaven is another place where spirits abide, and where our souls will live eternally if we gain admission while we live on earth. We have already shown that such a view of heaven has little biblical warrant.

A second view is that, after all, there is nothing but the physical, empirical, measurable world, and that what the Creed refers to is the earth and the sky—or, in more modern terms, our planet and the space around it. It is true that when Scripture speaks of "heaven," it often means little more than the sky. But normally "heaven" is much more than that. Heaven is a hidden order of reality that reminds us that the empirical, predictable, measurable earth is not the totality of creation. God the *pantocrator* rules not only over earth but also over heaven. The struggle against sin and its power takes place not only on earth but also in heaven.

What this means is that the "earth" that we can see, measure, understand, and rule is only part of God's creation. Next to the earth, above, under, and around it, stands this other dimension of creation, "heaven."

This is of crucial importance for Hispanic piety and theology. We hear much these days about the "modern" notion of a "closed universe." We are told that since the mechanistic view of the universe seems to work, and since in any case we can only think in terms of cause and effect, it is senseless to speak in terms of divine intervention in history. The universe is closed to divine intervention and works only on the basis of unalterable laws that cannot be changed or suspended. Thus part of "modernity" is to believe in such a closed universe. As Rudolf Bultmann has put it, "It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles."²

The fact, however, is that it is not only possible but even common. All over the world, and certainly in the Hispanic believing community, people use not only electric light and the wireless but computers and laser printers to tell about the wondrous things that God has done in their lives.

Is this simply a matter of willful denial of what should be self-evident to any thinking person, as Bultmann would have us believe? Or is there more to it? One could argue that the view that the universe is closed and its workings are like those of a machine is part of the ideology by which those who control the present order destroy or curtail the hope of those whose only hope lies in change. "Modern reason" precludes our thinking in terms of divine intervention. But by whose standards of "modernity" and whose definition of "reason"?³

The fact is that ever since Kant, we have been aware of the degree to which our reason imposes its limits on the world—how we say, for instance, that causality is a "law of nature" because it is a law of our own reason. With the work of Freud, Marx, and their successors, it has also become clear that "reason" does not function in a vacuum but is conditioned by historical, psychological, socioeconomic, and other factors. We have also learned that "reason" can hide those factors from itself and thus convince itself that its conclusions are the result of "pure reason." Thus when "reason" seems to require that we believe in a "closed universe," one that is impervious to anything but mechanistic laws, one begins to wonder whether this is not a definition of "reason" that is designed as a defense of the status quo, and as a means to discourage those whose strength comes from the hope of divine intervention.

To such a closed view of the universe, we answer that God is the creator of heaven and earth, and that the earth that the mind can

encompass and manipulate to its own ends is but a part of the whole—a part whose very nature is misunderstood when it is taken for the whole.

In summary, to say that God is the creator of earth and heaven is to say that earth does not exhaust the reality of creation. Earth, as that which we can understand and manage, is only part of that reality. According to the workings of earth, the powerful will remain powerful since they control the mechanisms of nature and of history. But there are also the workings of *heaven*, the mysterious and uncontrollable dimension of creation.

To say, on the other hand, that God is the creator of heaven and earth is to say that the rational, predictable workings of earth are also part of God's creation, and that one cannot serve God without seeking to employ those workings for God's ends.

Both of these are an important part of a genuine Hispanic spirituality. All one has to do is attend a Hispanic worship service or prayer meeting to come to the conclusion that the Hispanic universe is not closed, that it is not limited to "earth" but has a very strong element of trust in the workings of "heaven." If anything, some of us are sometimes tempted to give up on "earth" and its workings, which so often are employed against us. But when so tempted, we are corrected by our faith in "God the Parent all-ruling, maker of heaven and earth."

Creation and Evolution

There is much debate these days about the theory of evolution and its relation to the doctrine of creation. This is not the place to join that debate, but there are two points that require clarification, especially inasmuch as they touch on Hispanic experience and theology.

The first of these is that the debate tends to reduce the doctrine of creation to what should properly be named "the beginning of creation."⁴ Creation, properly understood, is not something that took place sometime in the past—be it six thousand or six billion years ago—and that now is a matter of antiquarian curiosity or fanatical orthodoxy. Creation has to do both with the beginning and with the continued existence of heaven and earth. One should not suppose that God was Creator only in the beginning and has now relinquished that role in favor of Sustainer. Creation subsists, even now, because God has called it and continues calling it out of nothingness into being. Without the sustaining and creating Word of God, heaven and earth would not subsist for an instant. The doctrine of creation, therefore, is not merely

a statement about origins; it is also and foremost a statement about present reality and present responsibility.

The second point that needs clarification is the meaning of "evolution," and the reason why much of what is understood by that term is indeed antibiblical. The problem with evolution is not that it claims that it took God so many billions of years to bring the world to its present state—in fact, God is still not finished with the world, and "it does not yet appear what we are to be." The problem with the theory of evolution, at least in its most popular versions, is that it asserts that the ultimate rule of creation is the survival of the fittest. This is indeed antibiblical. The ultimate rule of creation is the victory of love. Nowhere is this more clearly shown than in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, destroyed as unfit by the fittest empire of his time and yet risen again from the dead.

To claim that the ultimate rule of the universe is the survival of the fittest is to assert that the process whereby the powerful and the successful oppress and destroy the powerless is part of the evolutionary process by which a better world is created. It is for this reason, and not because it speaks of millions of years instead of seven days, that we as Hispanics must denounce the simplistic evolutionary schemes that so often pass for science. We denounce and reject them because they have gone beyond the point of biological theory and have become the justification of social policy.