

Theology of Creation ~ Prof Stephen Williams

Theologies of creation in contemporary Christianity vary enormously. The traditional strong distinction between Creator and creation was challenged in the 'quiet revolution' in twentieth century theology by the growth of panentheism and the challenge to the tradition became more radical still with the advent of other theologies, such as the ecofeminist. My objective is as little as possible to enter into theological controversy in this conference, but to outline what may be loosely and simplistically called a 'biblical theology of creation'. Given the canonical Scriptures, what elements structure its understanding of creation? Whilst this is being selective, I pick out five features. (1) The creation is good: structurally fit for the purposes that God has for it. (2) Human dominion is a matter of care for that which the Creator has already pronounced good. (3) The covenant made with Noah is not only made with the whole of creation but also forms the background to the great covenants of the Hebrew Scriptures: Abraham was the descendant of Noah, through Shem, and so heir of a covenant with creation; the covenant with Israel at Sinai is grafted onto the covenant with Abraham. (4) God is providentially concerned for the whole of his creation. (5) Eschatological peace is portrayed as extending to the whole of creation. There are other features of equal importance, including the significance of the praise which all creation offers God, but I have selected those which structure the broad biblical narrative.

It is widely perceived that the credibility of this portrayal is undermined by Darwinism, particularly in its disclosure of the cruelty, purposelessness and waste which attends nature and which is inexplicable in terms of belief in a benign Creator. If we accept the data disclosed in this theory (not necessarily Darwinian theory itself - there are non-Darwinian interpretations of evolution), we might formulate five responses. (1) The existence of radical disorder in the cosmos, and the attendant mystery of evil, is explicitly flagged up early in Genesis by the appearance of a serpent who is God's creature, although creation has been pronounced good. The Bible itself dramatically announces the problem and its inexplicably dark mystery. (2) A world in which humans are responsible for using their freedom one way or another must be a fragile world. I can only hurt your body if your body could be hurt by a fall; I can only kill you if death is possible naturally. (3) There is a two-sidedness in the cosmos: earthquakes or volcanoes which cause destruction are also necessary for the fructification of the earth. (4) There also seems to be a wide systemic inter-connectedness in creation, such that flourishing is possible only because non-flourishing is also possible. (5) The book of Ecclesiastes insists that you cannot read meaning and purpose off the world; of itself, the cosmos proclaims its own 'meaninglessness'; the source of meaning must be found elsewhere. These considerations do *not* add up to a complete response; evil and suffering are ultimately inexplicable within any world-view and it is sometimes hard to know how to distinguish between (a) a necessary intertwining of 'good' and 'negative' elements in creation and (b) the implications of human evil.

Key to a theology of creation is the future. Genesis tells of the beginning of a divine project which is destined to end in eschatological perfection. Although eschatological hope for the whole does inspire us with a general vision and motivation for environmental concern, we have no idea what the new earth will look like, nor the extent of devastation which could be visited on this earth, nor the extent of continuity between what is now and will be in terms of animal and plant life etc. However, our ignorance makes no difference to our motivation. Preservation of the environment is a work of love, not a work of hope if, by 'hope' we mean: 'working in the light of what God has *promised*' will endure. We are meant to apprehend God's creation in love; we are meant to labour for it in love.