

God and Creation

- Conference 2, from the "Wonderfully Made" Premium Group series.

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Posted 12 October 2005 09:18 AM, by Phil

What is the relationship between God and creation? How do you envision the connection? How would you express this symbolically?



The way we answer these questions has a profound impact on how we understand both God and ourselves. Indeed, this is probably the most basic and important area of philosophical and theological investigation, for, depending on how one understands this, a whole range of other positions follow. It also impacts our spirituality, for how we conceive the relationship between God and creation ultimately influences how we view our connection to God. Different perspectives, here, give rise to different disciplines.

Among the philosophies of the world, we find a wide range of positions on God and creation. One extreme position is *monism*, which views creation to be God's "body," as

it were. Obviously, this view affirms a most intimate connection between God and the creation, so much so that a creature can rightly say, "I am God," though in a limited expression, of course. A monistic perspective is common among Hindu and New Age religions.

Another extreme is *deism*, which draws a sharp distinction between God and creation and holds that God isn't much involved in creation. The analogy often used to describe deism is that God is like a clock-maker, who created the universe, wound it up with certain laws, then allowed it to unfold according to these laws.

Consider the spiritual implications of these two views. If you are a monist, you will embrace disciplines that emphasize letting go of false identities so you can awaken to your own innate divinity. There is no one to relate to in such a system -- no God "out there" who is an-Other with whom to relate. It's all "in here," or immanent, and your meditative approach would be to take this focus. If, on the other hand, you are a deist, then you would focus more on learning the laws of nature so that you might learn to co-operate with the order God imposed on the creation. Thus would you hope to find some degree of true identity and happiness.

The Judeo-Christian position is neither monistic nor deistic. As with monism, however, a deep intimacy between God and creation is affirmed, but a distinction is nevertheless maintained so that, like deism, a certain lawfulness to the created order is recognized.

Made, Not Begotten

The first sentence in the opening book of the Bible provides a perspective that sets the tone for the Judeo-Christian view of God and creation. There we learn that, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." From this statement we see that:

A. The universe has a beginning; it is not eternal; therefore, it is not God, who is eternal, as the previous session affirmed.

B. The universe is the consequence of a creative act of God. It is therefore contingent, or dependent upon God for its existence.

The first point rules out monistic systems of thought, but the second leaves the deistic possibility open . . . for just a little while, however. A few paragraphs later, in Genesis, we hear of God's delight in creation and God communicating with our first parents. Things eventually develop to the point that God takes the initiative in covenanting with Abraham and his ancestors. This all goes against the deistic approach in that to covenant means something similar to becoming family with each other, and the god of deism could care less about something like that.



Many centuries later, the Council of Nicea in the early 4th Century A.D. noted that the Christ was "begotten, not made," going on to say that he is "one in being with the Father." This powerful affirmation of the Incarnation of the Word is a topic we will take up in a later session. For now, we note the distinction between "begotten" and "made." A good way to explain it would be to say that parents *beget* children while artists *make* artifacts. With regard to the universe, Scripture (and, later, Christian tradition) affirms that *the universe was made, not begotten*. It is God's handiwork, or work of art, and God is very pleased with it.

When you examine a work of art, you can learn something about the artist, but only so much. So it is with the universe and God. The heavens are indeed telling the glory and majesty of God, for what a Creator God must be to have made the universe with its billions of galaxies, stars, and all the various life forms we find on our planet! Something of the qualities of creation must exist in God, or else God could not have known to make

them. What a marvelous universe we find ourselves living in, and, by extension, how wonderful is our Creator!

Creation ex-nihilo

So far, so good, and not too difficult to write about or understand, I don't think. But how do we get from a self-subsistent God to a contingent universe? If, "before the beginning," there is only God, then how does the universe come from God? We've already ruled out monism -- that God somehow takes on a physical expression. And we've also ruled out any notion of there being a kind of pre-existent, uncreated material substance that God shaped into the universe; such would not be "made," but would, in fact, share some of the divine attributes, notably eternity. So if, "before the beginning," there is only God, and there is nothing else for God to use to make the universe, then what did God make the universe with?

This might seem to be a most unusual question, but it is one that occurred to me as early as the 5th grade, when I asked my mother to explain this to me. She deferred to Sr. Concordia, who told me it was a mystery -- as indeed it is! Nevertheless . . .

There is an "official" answer to the question, of course, and it is that *God created ex-nihilo, literally out of nothing*. This is a rather fine example of divine omnipotence, but it doesn't really answer the question except to say that God can do what God wants to do, and this includes making something out of nothing. OK . . . great!

But let's go a little deeper into this response. What if the "nothing" God created the universe out of is taken to be no-thing, i.e., no pre-existing, eternal matter? And what if, in addition, no-thing is a way of actually referring to God, Who, as the Supreme Being, is no-thing in particular?

Words of the Word

At this point, we turn to the prologue of John's Gospel, where we learn that:

In the beginning was the Word;
the Word was with God
and the Word was God.
He was with God in the beginning.
Through him all things came to be,
not-one-thing had its being but through him.
- John 1: 1-3

The Word, as we know, refers to the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, and what we learn, here, is that God (the Father) creates the universe through the Word. Additionally: not-one-thing (i.e. no-thing) exists but through the Word. There is the term, "nothing," again, but in a new context; now it means that "everything" has received its being

through the Word. *So we get from the no-thing of God to the every-thing of creation through the Word.*

The term used for Word in this passage is *Logos*, which is Greek for speech, thought, or life principle. John uses this word intentionally to indicate a movement within the divine toward creation -- from the Father Who has the creative idea to the Logos/Word through Whom the idea is expressed and given form. *And what is expressed is creation!* Hence, creation can be understood to be the expression of divine ideas; it is divine-speak. This is a radically different understanding than monism and deism, but it does resonate with some aspects of both.

Consider the relationship between yourself and the words you speak. Surely, you are not those sounds, but, on the other hand, they do not exist except that you give them expression. Furthermore, they indicate an idea you are sharing, and they even communicate something of your presence. One who hears or reads your words encounters you -- not the whole of you, of course, but something of you. If it is an audible word, it vibrates to the rhythm of your speech, and communicates a wide range of verbal and non-verbal content, all of which mediate a sense of your presence. We encounter one another through our words, and form profound relationships through their mediation. All the while, however, the real person remains forever "other," or transcendent to the words spoken, never to be completely exhausted in being through all the words he or she could ever speak.

I think we can say something of the same is analogously true of the relationship between God and creation. God speaks the creation, and so there is a profound intimacy that exists between the two. Creation is not-God per se, but does express the divine ideas and even communicates something of the divine presence. To deeply and authentically encounter creation is to encounter the Speaker of creation through the existence invested in creatures. If we look and listen to what's going on beyond the surface of things, we will find that creation in its contingency points beyond itself to the Giver of its existence; it also reveals some aspect of the Speaker's creativity. Thus we affirm the sacramental nature of creation -- that it is a kind of window to the divine.

Something else we can affirm is how words, once spoken, take on a life of their own. We recognize this with our own speech, and how our words often produce effects that go far beyond our immediate intent. Others hear our words and are affected by them, and they pass them on, now with their own ideas, so that, after awhile, what we have said has become embellished with many other words and presences.

So it is with creation, only much more marvelously so. The words/creatures spoken by God are invested with potentialities to enable them to interact with other words/creatures, and, in the case of intelligent beings, to even choose their own manner of connecting with other creatures. We shall say more about this in our next session, but for now we note that all creatures are imbued with some degree of intelligence and freedom, as these qualities are of the essence of God's personal nature. Every creature spoken into existence by God therefore vibrates with something of divine presence, in-

cluding the freedom and intelligence that make up the divine. And because the creature is indeed a new being, and not simply an extension or emanation of the divine, it is free to use its intelligence and existence as it chooses. This applies, to some extent, even to the inanimate creation, although no reflective consciousness is operative in such cases, of course.

How real the analogy?

Nice analogy, you might say, but how literally should one take this reflection on creation as divine speech?

I don't know. But given what we do know about creation from the empirical sciences -- especially physics -- I think the analogy is as good as any other. Einstein's physics taught us the connection between matter, space and energy . . . that things are not as solid as we think them to be. Quantum physics has, in addition, pointed out the manner in which consciousness affects the way we see the universe. In the end, however, scientists do not know why creation arises in the first place, nor why it has taken the form it has. So science cannot refute the analogy we have drawn above, which has both poetic and metaphysical appeal.

To view ourselves and other creatures as part of the divine symphony Can you feel the harmony? Do you know what instrument you play?

Questions and Discussion

1. What questions or comments do you have from this session?
2. How does the idea of creation as words of the Word speak to you? What are some of the implications of this perspective?