

Creation

Luke Timothy Johnson

The three topics of creation, resurrection, and eschatology have important features in common. They represent the three critical moments in the Christian myth, describing where we come from, in whom we live, and where we are heading. They, unlike many other theological topics, are of absolute importance: their affirmation or denial, and for that matter, the manner in which they are understood, affect everything else in the Christian worldview and in Christian practice.

The three subjects are all, furthermore, much more about the decisions humans make about their own existence than they are about the description of an objective reality detachable from the mystery of human freedom. To declare God as Creator merely as an opinion that has no effect on how one lives is no more interesting than to declare that Pluto is or is not a planet. To state that Jesus is risen Lord without at every moment paying him absolute obedience is to be stating nothing very much more important than observing that the USA is a democracy without voting. To opine that Jesus will return has the same seriousness as reading a train schedule if that expectation does not direct the conduct of one's life.

All three topics also remind us of how limited our knowledge of reality is, how imperfect our capacity to speak truly about matters that matter most. These topics force us to think about our language and remind us that we strictly do not know what we are saying when we make statements about creation, resurrection, and eschatology.

The Limits of Language

Our language works best when we speak about everyday things, although we all have experienced the way even the solidest object or common word can seem to dissolve under close scrutiny. Still, the statement, "I like cornflakes" not only makes grammatical sense, it touches real things at every point. The "I" in question is the one with taste

buds, the "like" is the sensation of pleasure, and "cornflakes" is there in the bowl, waiting to be conveyed to my mouth. Contrast the similar-sounding statement, "I love the Lord," whose every word challenges definition even as the combination of words makes the same sense as "I like cornflakes." Who is the "I" in this case? It is both larger and more vague than the taste buds. What is "love?" Something greater and more complex than "like," but in this case especially, made obscure by the obvious fact that "the Lord" is very much unlike cornflakes, not available in my cereal bowl or in any other empirically verifiable manner.

Thinking about the limits of language ought to make us modest in our claims, no matter what our field of study. But modesty should be the mark above all of theologians for three good reasons. The first is that although all theological statements have some sort of real-life, practical corollaries, they are also always predicates whose subject is invisible and ultimately unknowable. The second is that, because theological language is intimately linked to human desires and longings, it is especially susceptible to manipulation and corruption. The third is that theologians can speak so often and glibly about their invisible subject, they can fall to thinking that their subject was as ordinary and digestible as cornflakes, and, worse, that they themselves understood their subject perfectly.

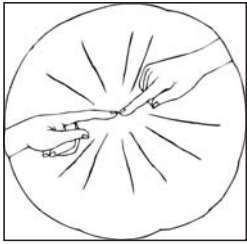
Thomas Aquinas insisted that all language about God and God's activity be chastened by a three-fold dialectic of affirmation and



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Essay

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To prevent language about God from becoming idolatrous ... we must also negate it. If mythic language asserts, "God makes," or "God is wise," then the apophatic impulse must quickly assert, "but God does not make," and "God is not wise," as a reminder of how all our language falls short of the reality toward which it points.

denial. He recognized the importance, indeed the necessity, of simple affirmations about God such as we find in Scripture, where God appears as a character among other characters, and where the language is therefore properly considered mythic. But such language is inadequate both because it ascribes inappropriate anthropomorphisms to God and because if taken as simply true becomes idolatrous. As Augustine remarked, "If you can say it, it is not God." Affirmative language must therefore be negated by what Aquinas called the *via negativa*, which was nothing else than the apophatic tradition of eastern Christianity: this moment of the dialectic insists that we cannot know God in the way we know cornflakes or even cornflake consumers.

To prevent language about God from becoming idolatrous, then, we must also negate it. If mythic language asserts, "God makes," or "God is wise," then the apophatic impulse must quickly assert, "but God does not make," and "God is not wise," as a reminder of how all our language falls short of the reality toward which it points. God truly is *not* wise in the way we ascribe wisdom to humans; similarly, God does *not* make the world in the way a baker makes cornflakes. The third moment of the dialectic is called the analogical (*via analogia*), which combines both affirmation and negation: we can say that God is wise but only in a way analogous to the ascription of wisdom to humans, and in this analogy, dissimilarity is as great as or greater than the similarity.

The Fundamental Truth

I remind myself and you of the problem of human language when speaking of God at the beginning of this essay on creation, precisely because this topic is so fundamental for everything else, and is also so vulnerable to distortions of language. The profession of God as Creator is fundamental first of all for the rest of the Christian myth to have any sense at all. It is because God is the Source of all things that God can also be Revealer, Savior, Sanctifier and Judge of all. Because heaven and earth are not God but come from God at every moment, they reveal by their very existence the one who makes them (Wis. 13:1-9; Rom. 1:19-20). Because God has "Maker's knowledge" of all things—that is, knowledge from within—God can judge

righteously as one who "knows the heart" (Acts 1:24) and cannot be swayed by appearances (1 Pet. 1:17). Because God loves what God has made, God seeks to save his world (Pss. 65:1-15; 79:9; 1 Tim. 4:10). Because the universe is the bodily expression of God's Spirit, by his Holy Spirit, God is able to transform the world and sanctify it (Ps. 51:1-17; Rom. 15:16; 2 Thess. 2:13).

The profession of God as Creator is fundamental as well because it most decisively divides humans in their most basic response to the world in which they find themselves. The real divide is between atheists and believers. Deists and agnostics fall on neither side of the divide because they neither affirm nor deny anything very important. A deist god who once wound the world like a clock and then let it tick on its own may be praised or blamed for good or poor craftsmanship, but in no manner resembles the God professed as Creator of heaven and earth by robust Jews, Christians, and Muslims. As for agnostics, their pretense of intellectual respectability and detachment masks intellectual confusion and moral laziness; humans cannot remain detached concerning the most pressing of all existential questions, as though it were a hypothesis still requiring more information to be satisfactorily demonstrated, and we were only interested observers in the outcome.

Atheists seldom adopt their position because of scientific knowledge, although science often serves to legitimate a stance that derives from a moral rather than a purely intellectual posture toward the world. There is a long tradition of "noble atheists" who refuse to acknowledge the existence of an all-powerful and loving God precisely because of the perceived savagery in nature ("bloody in tooth and claw") and the overwhelming evidence of cruelty and evil among humans. As memorably stated by Montaigne, "God's only excuse is that he does not exist." Such atheists regard belief in a creator God as a craven relinquishment of human freedom and moral responsibility. Other atheists, to be sure, are less noble. They are named in the Bible as the fools who say in their heart, "there is no god," precisely to exercise their freedom in moral irresponsibility. As Nietzsche stated, "If there is no god, all things are possible." Such atheism is not the result of scientific reasoning;

it is the willful denial of human contingency and the assertion of a false independence.

The Languages of Faith

On the other side of the divide are those who profess belief in a creator God. On this side also, it is necessary to examine the expression of that belief and its basis. For believers, three kinds of language are involved. None of them are scientific in any sense of the word. Just as atheism seldom if ever results from strictly scientific examination of the empirical world, so does belief equally rarely stem from or find its basis in a strictly scientific analysis. The first language is that of the Christian creed, the second is the language of Scripture, and the third is the language of the human heart.

I take the beginning of the Nicene Creed—the most widely used liturgical expression of Christian faith—as a starting point: “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things, visible and invisible.” Even the minority of Christians who find creeds generally unpalatable will subscribe to this statement as representing their position. I would hope that they would agree to two further observations concerning this declaration. The first is that the creed is a communal and public declaration rather than an individual and private one. The person who recites the creed with others in worship thereby declares an allegiance not only to the truth of the proposition but to all the others affirming the proposition, and acknowledges implicitly as well that, at any given moment, the church believes more and better than any individual believer. The second is that the language of the creed is performative: those who recite it *profess* the conviction that God is the Source and End of their existence and their commitment to live in a manner consonant with that profession.

The creed, in turn, derives from and provides a guide to reading the much more complex language of Scripture. All Christians would agree that the specific language shaping their view of creation, which the creed reduces to the level of a proposition, is the rich and variegated language of the Old and New Testaments concerning God as the Source and Goal of all that exists. The language of Scripture is indeed rich, but it is also variegated.

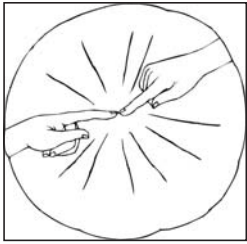
It is diverse first of all because Scripture’s compositions were written by humans across many centuries and lands and reflect the linguistic and cultural features of their time and place. Christians affirm the divine inspiration of Scripture, to be sure, but that affirmation is connected to the equally important one that, as the creed says, the Holy Spirit “spoke through the prophets,” that is, the human Moses, Isaiah, David, Solomon, and Paul, and gave specific and finite expression to the Word that God wanted humans to hear and obey. Because of the distinct historical location and perspective of these human authors, further-

more, Scripture contains distinct witnesses concerning everything from creation to incarnation, witnesses whose value is to be found precisely in the fact that they do not agree on every point. We are not astonished, then, to find one witness to God’s creative activity in the first chapter of Genesis and another in the second chapter, and still others in the psalms and the prophets. One way to misuse the language of Scripture is to ignore this plurality of voices and consider only one as significant. The creed, in fact, derives its terse but comprehensive statement concerning God as Creator from the entire range of its witnesses.

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The language of Scripture is diverse also because the compositions speak in a variety of modes. Some are narratives of a quasi-historical character and others are narratives in a legendary or mythic mode. Other parts of Scripture consist in law. Still others speak in the form of prayer or poetry or prophecy or proverb, and in these modes the metaphorical is always dominant. It is an abuse of scriptural language to reduce all the modes to one, and above all to literalize, and thereby kill, Scripture’s metaphors. Despite all this diversity, it is true that Scripture’s many witnesses speak with a remarkable consistency on the points that matter most. Indeed, this is one of the small miracles that make people think of the Bible as inspired: written by so many people over so many centuries and social settings, Scripture nevertheless imagines a world that is internally and satisfyingly coherent.

I use the term “imagines” advisedly. Scripture does not so much describe the empirical world that is the realm of scientific hypothesis and demonstration as it imagines the world as at every moment deriving from and directed to one ultimate power. Because Scripture so imagines the world, it also reveals the world as a place permeable to and penetrated by that divine power and invites readers to share that imaginative vision and to render it as empirical by living as though it were real. Because goodness, beauty, and truth exist among humans, Scripture imagines their Maker as also possessing goodness, beauty, and truth, and so imagines humans—all empirical evidence to the contrary notwithstanding—as created in the image of their



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Maker. But, wonder of wonders, although wickedness and unrighteousness also exist among humans, Scripture does not ascribe those qualities to the Creator; instead, all that God makes is “good, very good,” and God is imagined as faithful and compassionate and righteous in every respect.

The third language that comes into play in Christian faith in God as Creator is the language of the heart. By this I do not mean simply feeling or sentiment. “A feeling of dependence” does not necessarily translate to the creating God of Scripture and the creed. When the Bible speaks of the human heart, it refers also to the seat of the deepest forms of thought and discernment, of decision and of moral disposition. Blaise Pascal drew on this dimension when he said that “the heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of” (*Pensees* 277).

The heart in this sense leads us to the deepest and most obscure mystery of human freedom: just as the noble atheist looks at the world and finds it lacking either logic or mercy, so does the believer gaze on the world and find it drenched with grace. Who knows how, or why? We cannot account for the tangle of causes that lead to such different effects. We do not know why one person can place a finger to pulse and feel the power of God and another can feel only the movement of blood. All we can say is that it is the language of the heart within the believer that makes the language of the Bible sensible, even compelling, and the language of the creed something gladly to embrace, while the atheist finds the language of the Bible unintelligible when not obscure, and the creed’s profession the perfect example of intellectual alienation. The believer finds congruence among the three languages. The atheist finds a dire dissonance between the first two and what the heart speaks.

Thinking with Scripture

Christian thinking about God as Creator—something distinct from believing in and obeying God as Creator—starts with and never moves far from the language of Scripture, for what Christians confess as creation is not the result of a logical inference from the available empirical data, but the acceptance and celebration of the imaginative vision offered them by Scripture. Thinking

with Scripture about this topic often suffers, however, from two interrelated errors. The first is to take the first two chapters of Genesis as though they were the only pertinent texts to consider, the second is to reduce the stunningly imaginative vision of Genesis to a literalism that simultaneously robs it of poetry and diminishes the importance of its witness. I suggest that the best way to avoid the second error is by eliminating the first.

Each of the creation accounts in Genesis has its own beauty and power. The first tells us that God is not to be identified with the world or with part of the world, but rather is the Originator of all that exists; that God brings everything into being by the power of his word; that creation is therefore ordered and declared good as God makes it. It imagines humans as created in the image and likeness of God, male and female equally participating in that image, and equally exercising dominion among other creatures. It declares human sexuality good by making the propagation of children the first divine commandment. This vision of creation is majestic, the unfolding of a cosmic drama, with God orchestrating the entire process through his command, his internal counsel (“let us make man”) and his approving comment.

The creation account in Genesis 2 has its own distinctive vision, equally imaginative and powerful. Here, God is much more intimately involved with creation, forming a human from the dust of the earth, placing him in a garden to tend and preserve, parading the animals before Adam to receive a name and possibly find a mate for the man, expressing empathy (“it is not good for man to be alone”), shaping a partner for the male from his rib. In this version, the narrator focuses on the relationship between man and woman (they cleave to each other) more than their propagation of children; and imposing limits to what they can eat that introduces the possibility in the creature of obedience or disobedience.

Taken together, both accounts of creation have a wisdom that speaks inexhaustibly to the human condition, not only as it was “in the beginning” but above all as it continues to be in every circumstance throughout time. It is not at all strange that these accounts are echoed in the paeans to personified wisdom

in Proverbs 8 and Sirach 24, for they have preoccupied sages in the Jewish and Christian traditions for centuries, constantly enriching those who invest their minds, and especially their imaginations, in the study of these texts.

When these wonderful passages are isolated from the other voices within Scripture and read in an inappropriately literalistic fashion, the passages are deprived of their power precisely to the degree that they are robbed of their magic. The perils of reading the beginning of Genesis as though it were a literal, historical description, are illustrated by Saint Augustine, who tried three times to interpret Genesis according to the letter, and never got past the opening passages. Augustine kept getting stuck. From our advantage, we can see that he lacked an understanding of narrative truth that would enable him to engage the metaphoric qualities of the accounts in their own terms. As soon as one starts trying to parse out in the first chapter the relation of light and day, of the temporality of days, or the placement of the firmaments or the arrangement of the plants and animals, as though these were matters of natural scientific inquiry, one loses the point of the account altogether.

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The second chapter of Genesis is worse. How can one speak literally of humans made from dust or a woman made from a rib? Such conceptions do not defy sophisticated theories of evolution; they do not rise even to the level of basic human biology. Only people who are simultaneously desperate to maintain the truth of Scripture and have reduced the truth of narrative to the referential can commit such grievous offenses against intellectual integrity as to seek science in these poetic tales.

The temptation to literalize the poetry of Genesis 1–2 grows greater to the extent that these chapters are isolated from other scriptural voices and treated as though they contained all that Scripture had to say on the subject of God’s creation. In fact, these chapters are not the only or even the most important scriptural witnesses to this reality. And what happens when they are isolated is that

creation appears to be an event that happened in the distant past (rather than also in the present)—it is read as a chronological beginning rather than as existential cause—and therefore also as something that is concluded rather than continuing. In short, when isolated and read literally, the passages in Genesis can be read as supporting precisely the deist conception of a god who is around to get things started and then leaves creation to its own devices—apart from a few extraordinary interventions that have come to be called “miracles.”

The other voices of Scripture, in contrast, suggest that God’s creative activity never ceases. Psalm 104, for example, celebrates creation as a wonder that God performs new every day. Continuously God summons and controls the forces of nature, establishes and maintains the boundaries of the universe, and calls into being and nourishes the world’s plants and animals. God does this not once but always:

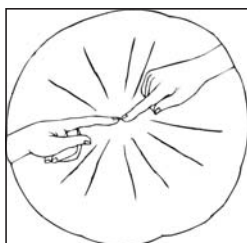
These all look to you to give them their food in due season; when you give it to them they gather it up; when you open your hand they are filled with good things. When you hide your face they are dismayed, when you take away their breath, they die and return to their dust. When you send forth their spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth. May the glory of the Lord endure forever, may the Lord rejoice in his works, who looks on the earth and it trembles, who touches the mountains and they smoke ... bless the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Lord! (Ps. 104:27–35).

This God creates anew every day. This is a God who is totally in touch with the changing world because it is by his power that it comes into being and changes!

In the prophets we find a deep congruence between God’s continuing creative power and God’s shaping human events in history. Thus Isaiah mingles the language of creation and that of new creation in history. The God who now “makes the things to come” (Isa. 45:11) is “the Lord who makes you” (Isa. 54:5) and who makes things new (43:19; 48:6). Isaiah links God’s creative energies in the beginning, his constant renewal of the earth, and his work within human events:

Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread forth the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it, and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the Lord, I have called you to righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you, I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations ... I am the Lord, that is my name (Isa. 42:5–8).

In the New Testament, God’s continuing capacity to create is expressed above all in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead (Rom. 4:17–24). For Paul, the resurrection of Jesus is so radical that it can only be called a “new



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creation" (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15). Christ is the "last Adam" (1 Cor. 15:45), who is the "new human" (Col. 3:10), by whose image other humans are measured and into whose image the Spirit shapes believers (2 Cor. 5:17–18). Paul merges creation and resurrection language when he declares, "The God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shown in our hearts to bring to light the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6).

Not even the resurrection of Jesus and the renewal of humanity (Rom. 12:1–2) mark the end of God's creative activity. The Book of Revelation joins the first creation to the new: "Worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water" (14:7); and "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more ... and he who sat upon the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new'" (21:1–5). Also 2 Pet. 3:13 declares: "According to his promise, we await new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells." In sum, the dominant testimony of Scripture is that creation is not simply an event in the past, but is a constant and present activity of God.

Thinking Theologically about Creation

I have elsewhere used the expression "critical theological concept." By this I mean that we cannot supply an adequate account of the positive content of a conviction, but we know that the denial of it distorts essential truths. By analogy, I may not be able to demonstrate the ways or degree to which my wife loves me, but to deny that she loves me would mean distorting every aspect of my life.

In conclusion, I make a series of ten short affirmations that spell out the critical theological concept of God's creation that is stated as a proposition by the creed, witnessed to poetically by Scripture, and testified to by the hearts of believers.

1. The profession of God as Creator is the supreme example of a critical theological concept. It is impossible for us to declare the positive content of the statement. We cannot demonstrate in any scientific fashion that God creates the world, much less how cre-

ation takes place. But we stake our lives on the conviction that denying God's creation means distorting both the world and our place within it. We agree with Paul that this first and greatest lie, the failure to acknowledge God's claim on us in our creaturely status, leads to the systemic lies and distortions that corrupt human existence and lead creation itself into bondage (Rom. 1:18–32; 8:20).

2. Theologically, we must think of the phrase of Gen. 1:1, "In the Beginning," not in terms of time but in terms of causes. If we think of "beginning" only in terms of chronology, then we may imagine creation as initiated and completed by God long ago. God would indeed be like a watchmaker whose work can still be detected from the intricate design of a timepiece, but who is no longer needed once the watch leaves the shop. Scripture, in contrast, sees God as the breath that moves through and stirs the world, as the "Life-Giver" who brings all things into existence at every moment. God is the world's "beginning," not once long ago but at every moment.

3. Scripture and the human heart also attest to the truth that God's creative activity continues as the fundamental sustaining and shaping power at work in all things, as the cause that causes all other causes. God as Life-Giver always moves ahead of the processes of the world because at every moment of every process God's power is at work. God as Creator is not, as some have supposed, like the first cause in a series of causes, which demands, as Bertrand Russell complained, an infinite regress. Rather, God's creative activity is the cause simultaneously (so to speak) underlying the entire series of causes.

4. The Christian confession of God as Creator is therefore not a theory about *how* things came and come into existence, but is rather a perception *that* all things are always and at every moment coming into being. God's self-disclosure in creation, therefore, is not like the traces of the watchmaker in his watch. God is revealed first of all not in the *whatness* of things—their essence—but in the *isness* of things—their very existence. That anything exists at all—that there should be rather than not be anything—is the primordial mystery that points us to God.

5. Everything that exists, insofar as it exists, is equally capable of revealing God. Although they differ in size and significance, a mouse and a mountain reveal the creating God in the same way, by their coming into being in the world. The smallest cell and the largest stellar constellation are equally fragile, equally dependent on God—at every second—for their existence. Likewise, every human breath, thought, impulse, and movement is dependent on the creating God, and that state of contingency—of real but unnecessary existence derived from another—never changes into a more secure condition, not for mountains, not for humans. All that is constantly comes into and moves out of existence while God alone, who breathes through them all, remains necessary and sufficient.

6. All that is sensible in our world—everything material that presses upon us and that we engage in daily—points beyond itself to an unseen power that brings it into existence. Understood in this fashion, the world itself in all its creatures and all its processes can be regarded as God's chosen instrument of self-revelation. Spirit needs body for its expression, and the world itself in its contingent existence, in its continual coming-into-being, is the body God has chosen to express his own spirit. God's revelation is not something that takes place outside the world's processes but precisely and necessarily through them, through the expressive shape of leaf and flower, through the slink of snakes over stones and the movement of tigers in the night, through the body language of erotic love, through the symbolic gestures and words of the prophets. A corollary of this appreciation of revelation is that the appropriate disposition of humans toward the world is not one of dominance or manipulation but one of the profoundest reverence and attentiveness.

7. To see God's creative activity at work in every worldly process and event, in the coming to be of all that comes to be, means to see the miraculous everywhere and in everything. Everything that exists is wondrous and inexplicable in its existence. The miraculous is not, as modernity would have it, an exception to the iron-clad laws of nature, but is rather the magic of God's work in everything whose law or logic humans strive to decipher. In this understanding, a healing worked by the medical art is just as much a miracle as a healing accomplished by prayer, for existence in all its forms and expressions is equally a surprising and gracious demonstration of the power of God. Christians correctly perceive the efforts of modernity to demystify the world as erroneous, an idolatrous effort to replace with a set of mechanical explanations, the beauty and mystery inherent in the veiled dance we call existence.

8. This vision of creation—which is the vision supported by the entire weight of Scripture—is entirely compatible with theories of evolution, for it sees God's world as

always in the process of becoming, never finished once for all, always flowing from the infinite creative energies of the all-powerful Life-Giver. Theories of astronomy and geology and biology that enable us to perceive a universe immeasurably more vast than we had earlier imagined, an earth far more constantly in ferment from the powerful interactions among tectonic plates than we appreciated until very recently, and an ecology far more complexly developed and more fragilely interconnected than ages before us realized, all these scientific perspectives address and can only address the interconnecting causes and effects of beings that have been or are now already in existence. They cannot account for existence itself, for the fact that anything at all should be rather than not be, for the reality that all things together hang dependently on a power not their own. But concerning the sequence of becoming, scientific theories touching on an expanding universe and evolving species are actually more congruent with the scriptural witness concerning the ever-creating God than an antiquated science of static and stable entities set forever in an unchanging order.

9. If God's creation of the world is not a scientific theory but a critical theological concept, neither is it simply a vision of reality that gives rise to worship (though it certainly does that!), but a profession that commits believers to certain dispositions and practices with respect to the world. Among dispositions, I have already mentioned an attitude of reverence and attentiveness rather than manipulation and dominance as prerequisite to discerning God's self-disclosure through his continuing creation of the world. Connected to this disposition are practices with respect to the use of material things, among them a commitment to an ecological care for the earth based not on a craven fear of extinction but on the theological perception that "the earth's is the Lord's and the fullness thereof," and that, as God's chosen instrument of self-disclosure, the earth remains always God's gift, given at every moment. It never becomes a human possession or plaything for careless disposal. Closely connected to such an ecological awareness is a commitment to the sharing of possessions among all God's creatures, a sharing that can be open-handed and generous precisely to the degree that humans recognize that their contingency cannot be erased through what they possess (as though being were having) but can be celebrated through what they share with others.

10. Finally, the vision of the world as coming into being at every moment out of nothingness by the power of an unseen but infinitely powerful God is the premise for any serious consideration of the resurrection of the dead or the realization of God's rule. Paul directs our thoughts when he speaks in Romans of the faith of Abraham: "He is our father in the sight of God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead, and calls into being what does not exist" (Rom. 4:17). *