

The purpose of this essay is to present the Church's understanding of creation, and to do so in light of the wisdom of St. Thomas Aquinas. The two arguments for the existence of God offered in the previous essay, the argument from world order and the argument from contingency, form the background for penetrating the mystery of creation.

It seems that when most people think of creation, they think of it as a past fact, a historical fact. To the minds of many, if the world was created at all, it was created in the past, and God's work of creating it is now over and done. Let us call this a historical account of creation.

Thomas Aquinas does not hold a historical account of creation, and he does not think of creation merely as a past fact that is now over and done. Rather, he holds a metaphysical account of creation. To say that God creates the world is to say that God gives being to contingent things: "to create, properly speaking is to cause or produce the being (*esse*) of things" (*Summa Theologiæ* 1.45.6). To be a creature is to depend on God for the very act of existence. Creation is the emanation from God of everything other than God, and this emanation is a present reality (*Summa Theologiæ* 1.45.1).

An analogy can help us to understand this claim. Just as the sun shining in the sky illuminates the atmosphere, so God gives being to everything other than God. The analogy illustrates two crucial points. First, just as on a sunny day the sun is now causing the atmosphere to be illuminated, so God is now causing contingent beings to be, here and now. Second, just as on a sunny day the illuminated atmosphere is now dependent on the sun for its illumination, so contingent beings are now depending on God for their very being. The relation of creature as a creature to the Creator as Creator is thus primarily present and not past, primarily vertical and not horizontal. So long as God now gives being

to contingent things, and so long as contingent things have this present vertical dependency on God for their very existence, then God creates them and they are God's creation.

Since this metaphysical feature of depending on God for being is primarily a present and vertical feature of things, it is compatible with a variety of historical possibilities about how things have unfolded or developed in history from horizontal causes or preceding conditions.

The Nature of Creation

Rev. James Brent, O.P.

Aquinas even considers the possibility of a world history such that

the world of nature has always existed without beginning, and he insists that even if the world had never begun to exist it would still be God's creation. This point is difficult to grasp, but worth considering with care.

Let us assume for the sake of a thought experiment, that there is an everlasting sunny day. By definition, such a day is without beginning and without end. On such an everlasting day, the illumination of the atmosphere would be everlastingly dependent on the sunshine. Similarly, even if the world of contingent beings were everlasting, it would be everlastingly dependent on God and God would be giving it being now and always. Each contingent being would presently depend on God for its very act of existing, and hence it would be God's creation.

A world of time without beginning or end would be a creation of God because the world and all things in it, including space and time, emanate from God and depend on God for their very existence.

Whether the world was comprised of a fixed number of biological species that remain ever the same or an evolving number and diversity of species, the world is created. For in either scenario, each thing in the world, including space and

time themselves, would emanate from God and depend on him for their very being.

In fact, there are a variety of possible scenarios about the ways in which the elements, molecules, and life-forms may have developed, evolved, or remain fixed, and in all these possible scenarios the world would be created so long as one did not deny each thing's ever present dependency on God for its very being or the emanation of things from the eternal God.

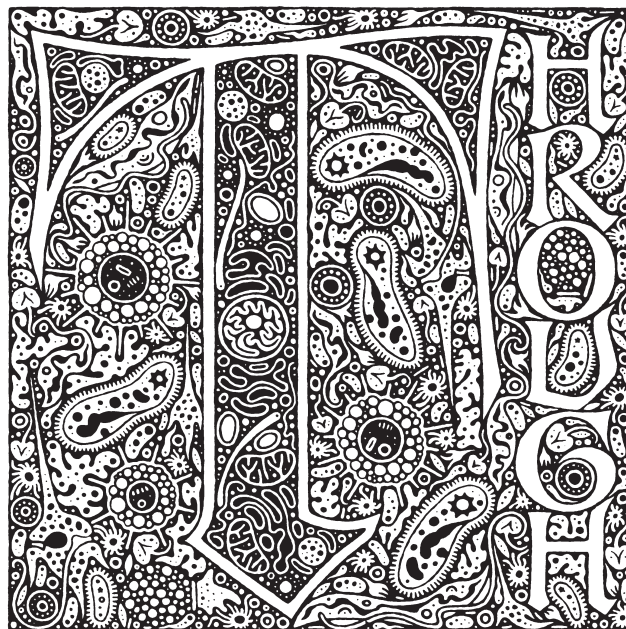
Two further important and related points are in order.

First, God creates the world freely. He does not have to give being to things, but he freely wills to do so. Why does he freely will to do so? Why does God create the world? In other words, what is the point of creation? We come to the question of the ultimate purpose of the world, and this question touches on God's wisdom in creation.

Second, God creates the world wisely. According to the argument from world order, God is the source of the order, coordination, and harmony of Nature. When we contemplate that order, we can see in it a plan or intelligibility. Biology and ecology both reveal a particularly breathtaking beauty, harmony, and order in things. We can see that there is an intelligible plan for the world, and we can see what the plan is to some extent (at least to the extent of knowing something of the general order of nature), even though we cannot discover God's plan for each particular thing in detail.

When we study the order of the world, we find a distinction between persons and things. Persons are beings capable of knowledge and love, things are beings without the capacity for knowledge and love.

To the question of what is God's ultimate purpose in creating the world, the answer of St. Thomas (in agreement with all the theologians of his day), is that God creates the world so that created persons may contemplate the order of things and by doing so come to know and love God to some extent—at least to the extent that his attributes are distantly reflected in the order, beauty, and harmony of things. In other words, God creates the world so that he may be known and loved by created persons. Another way to put this is that God created the world for his glory, *i.e.*



to show his attributes to us through the world of nature. Nature is God's sign language to us. Nature is a first revelation of God to human beings, a revelation accessible through natural reason apart from faith, and nature is the background for a second revelation of more intimate secrets of God: his Triune life, his plan of salvation through the Incarnation and Paschal Mystery, his call to eternal life in communion with God and the saints in the beatific vision. The second revelation calls for faith in God revealing himself in a higher way to us than by nature and reason.

The doctrine of creation is precisely the denial of view that God is hidden or inaccessible. The doctrine is the announcement that God creates the world in order to come out of hiding and be present, in different ways, to both the reason and faith of persons. **THE**

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