

Notes on Ch. 5: God the Creator: Creation, Providence, and Evil

A. This is a long and conceptually demanding chapter intending to re-establish and clarify a viable and faithful account of the grammar of Xn talk about God as Creator of the world wherein that ‘God’ is the triune God in differentiation from other gods and their grammars.

In providing such a triune grammar, the chapter contains sustained conversations with and critiques of what might be called classical or traditional theism and process theism in its varieties.

The basic linchpins of the grammar have already been introduced in Ch. 4 on the Triune God:

1. God is not the world.
2. God does not need the world in order to be God.
3. But God in freedom and love does create a world of creatures that are not God
4. That God does decide to create such a world, implies that God also decides in freedom and love to be affected by the world in its processes and temporality.
5. Such a grammar therefore denies that God is in actuality immutable and unchanging, unaffected by and impassible to creatures.
6. The elements of this grammar are simply rooted in unfolding the Triune Life of God as we know it the biblical testimony and in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and in the movement of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church and the world.
7. In order to elaborate how God can create a world and have a life with and for the world, we need to adopt a distinction between the concept of God’s essence and the concept of God’s actuality.
8. Hence, any muscular and realistic understanding of God as uniquely incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth at a particular point in creaturely time becomes unintelligible to itself and to the world if it insists as well that God cannot be acted upon by the world and is impassible to the ongoing life of the world.

B. Orienting Notes

Xn belief in God the Creator is properly a *faith conviction* and is thereby deeply interconnected to other prime beliefs, doctrines and themes of Xn theology.

It is not, therefore, simply a stand alone belief that the world has been created by some creator or cause or ground.

1. a faith conviction about the reality of God
2. a faith conviction about the reality and destiny of the world—the whole cosmos, of other reality.
3. a faith conviction about the meaning of *being a creature*.

It is not a conviction that is rooted in scientific discourses and practices and does not seek to find confirmation in such, and therefore it is not hostile to science as such, though particular beliefs by scientists might intend to be hostile.

Remember, I have already acknowledged that natural science is a contingent source of insight and understanding of the orders of the world, without also arguing that theology must find its basic sanction for reality claims in terms of the deliverances of so-called scientific reasoning.

So-called *creationism* is a misguided effort to presume to challenge a range of scientific theories by virtue of pretending to be better science.

C. Biblical Notes [241-43]

These notes are precise and to the point and no reason for me to reproduce them or condense them further herein.

The most controversial points in contemporary biblical scholarship is whether Genesis 1.1 means God created the world *ex nihilo*—a doctrine whose rationale we will explore later—or whether God’s creating is more analogous to bringing order out of chaos. However one might decide the precise

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exegetical issues in this verse, I will argue that in the long run, both for ongoing Judaism and Christians, the issue finally is whether the world itself has an ultimacy as ontologically strong as God's ultimacy. No doubt at various stages of Hebraic life there was an awareness of the troublesome recalcitrance of other creaturely powers to the ongoing ordering of the world by Yahweh.

In the NT it is evident that God is the Creator of all that is, even though there are creaturely powers that resist.

It should be noted that I will be contending against those theologians/philosophers who want to see God as of necessity ontologically dependent on and needing a world.

[Bluntly, I think too many biblical scholars and theologians have been too spooked by hardnosed classical theists in their insistence on a misleading understanding of God's omnipotence; in their interests in arguing that the classical theists have misunderstood the biblical view, these scholars have utterly misunderstood the transformative theologizing taking place in the early church's understanding of Jesus as Incarnate Word.

In what follows, I hope you can come to grips with and understand how a properly triune understanding of God can elide and retire the grip classical theism has had on the church, without thereby finding solace amid process theology.]

D. Basic Elements of the Grammar of God the Creator [244-59]

1. The Triune Creator

No pretence here that the grammar of God the Creator can sit on its own bottom: it is inextricably tied to triune considerations, especially the Economic Trinity.

2. God Creates in Loving Freedom

a. *that God creates in freedom* entails that God's creating that which is not-God arises only from God's own free decision.

That excludes saying that God creates out of internal or external necessity—which would mean that God could not be God without a world.

Process theism believes God needs some world in order to be God, while classical theism denies this, but at a high price.

b. *that God creates in love* affirms that the creating of the world is an act of generosity, that the fact of the world is not an occasion of God being jealous.

c. as developed in the doctrine of God, we need to distinguish between God's essence and God's actuality.

d. with the distinction between God's essence, which is unchanging, and God's actuality, which can change, we can grasp how the act of creating need not entail that the creation cannot act upon God.

It is this point that classical theism consistently denies, affirming as it does that God is immutable and impassible.

e. Put precisely, in deciding in loving freedom to create a world that is not-divine, God also self-determines Godself to be in real relation with the creation, to be acted upon by the ongoing life of the creation, to have a self-determining life and history with the created world.

f. or, being-creator is not a divine necessity but a divine act of loving freedom.

3. God creates nondivine creatures.

a. the basic ontological distinction is that between God the Creator and the nondivine creatures that are created.

4. God's Purposes in Creating a World

a. We are asking something close to the 'why' question: why did God create a world?

But when we put it that way, it grammatically looks as though God has some *internal need* for a world of nondivine creatures, and that again leads back into saying that God would be less-divine if God did not create a world.

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- b. In using the locution *purposes* we can ask about God's *aim* in creating a world without implying that God is fulfilling a need in God to be related to that which is not-God.
- c. But God did create a world in loving freedom and in light of God's economic life with the world, we can affirm the following as purposes in creating: [247]
 - i) that the creature might have life and actuality.
 - ii) that God might communicate Godself to the creature and have fellowship with the creature.
 - iii) that God might become a creature in order to bring the creature to fulfillment of life and actuality.
 - iv) that God might be enriched in God's own living actuality by the life and actuality of the creature.
 - v) that God might be glorified in and by the creature: the final teleology of God's creative action and life with the world is that God will be glorified by the creature precisely in and through God's sharing God's glory with the creature.[these points may sound odd to you, but why should they?]

5. *Creatio Ex Nihilo* [248-251]

In interpreting the meaning of God the Creator, as rooted in the OT testimony, and taken for granted in early Xn traditions, the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo*—creation out of nothing, out absolute non-being—became widespread in churches by the end of the 2nd century CE. The doctrine was especially useful in the early church in distinguishing Xn belief in God the Creator from a variety of other competing cosmologies and ontologies.

The doctrine serves two important negative functions:

- i) it denies that God creates the world out of Godself: that would divinize the world in some sense and is the constant temptation of many theologies both then and now.
- ii) it denies that God creates the world out of some pre-existing or everlasting stuff or matter or chaos: that would posit two ultimate realities, God and the stuff/chaos, thus negating God's sovereign singularity.

The doctrine has four positive functions:

- i) clearly affirms that anything that has nondivine actuality is brought to be by God's creative action.
- ii) asserts that creation as nondivine, has a beginning and an end.
- iii) underlines that grammatical given that God's creative action is singularly unique and without analogy in the creaturely world.
- iv) underscores that the God who creates all creatures from nothing is the One who is Almighty in power, the sovereign and supreme power—recall here how some traditional concepts of omnipotence have been reworked in the previous chapter on the attributes of God.

6. Creation as Triune *ad extra* Work

When the church has affirmed that the creation of the world is *ad extra* it is denying that such creating activity is essential/necessary to the reality of God and that without which God could not be God.

Hence, in affirming creation as *ad extra* the church can then say intelligibly that God creates the world in a free and loving action.

Further, it can also be said that the Father—the first person of the Trinity—has the primary activity of creating, though the Son and the Spirit also participate in the ordering of what is created.

7. God Creates Creatures

God creates nondivine actualities—called now 'creatures'—that are utterly other than God.

The basic ontological distinction in Christian theology is that between *the Creator and the creature*; the otherness between God and the creature is an otherness that precludes assuming

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that God and the creature both share in a concept of being or reality that they have in common. No univocal concept of being or reality.

Anticipating as well the triune activity of God, the otherness between God and creature is not an otherness that imprisons God: God can cross the boundary and become a creature, which is affirmed in the Son's incarnation. [important point made by Barth]

The otherness of the creature's actuality affirms its distinctness and relative independence of God.

The grammar of 'relative independence' of the creature will empower us to affirm the difference between 'what God does' and 'what the creature does'.

In their otherness from God, creatures are individually centers of activity, with their own internal focus, form, movement, and unity—also called their own *being-in-acts*.

The otherness of the creature is also the condition for God having a *relationship* with the creature in which God can *interact* with the creation and all the creatures.

8. Creation as an Interdependent and Ordered Cosmos

In creating creatures, God also create a cosmos of creatures in massive interconnection and interdependence among themselves—hence, we can use the terms 'cosmos', 'creation', 'world' interchangeably.

God creates space and time as the necessary conditions of creaturely actuality and finitude.

In their own space and time, creatures are *processes of becoming*—interacting with and being acted upon by other creatures in time, as temporal.

As a cosmos of creatures, the creation has *structures of relationality* that order the creatures among themselves; can refer to the such structures as 'laws of nature', as that necessary relationality that affects the actuality of all creatures.

We can also make a distinction between the grammar of 'relation' and 'relationship'.

A *relation* exists when an actuality is affected in its actuality by another actuality, hence a relation is internal to the actuality.

A *relationship* exists when an actuality is *intentional* toward another actuality, hence, humans have both relations and relationships.

We can also spell out the grammar of *force fields of power* as set of relations and structures that exercise power over the actualities that reside within the field but the field is not itself another actuality or reduceable to a particular actuality.

Can help us understand the NT language of *principalities and powers* and *elemental spirits*.

The cosmos can be understand as *an emerging world in process of becoming that will involve novelties as well as causal regularities*.

The created cosmos can be understood as *ordered by spiritual structures and actualities that are more than the order of physical causality and activity*, e.g. the biblical concept of *covenant*.

Yet, this finite cosmos of many creatures is a *cosmos of creatures with competing goods and losses*.

Real creatures—as dynamic centers of activity—impinge upon and collide with other creatures; hence creatures in their relational interactions with other creatures have real vulnerabilities to harm, distortion, pain and death from the activities of other creatures.

Notice the grammar of this statement: even God cannot create a human being that is absolutely preserved from pain and harm.

Some dimensions of suffering are built-in to being-a-creature.

Will explore related issues in the section on Evil in this chapter.

9. The Creation is Good

In saying that the creation is basically good, we are saying that:

- i) the creation and all the creatures therein are of *value to God*;
- ii) that God the Creator says a fundamental 'yes' to the creation;
- iii) that the creation of creatures is a *positive purpose of God*.

All of this is rooted in our saying that God creates the world in *loving freedom* and that the creature in relation to God will affect God's life and being and will be embraced by God.

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God's 'yes' to the creature is also the basis for God's 'no' to the sin of the human creature, as now expressed in God's reconciling action in Jesus Christ.

Note well: this goodness includes the bodies of creatures—bodies as such are good.

But this is not saying the creation is *morally good or perfect*—different sense of 'good'.

Important denials that have been threatened in other understandings of the world:

- i) denying the belief of Marcion that the creaturely world is a fallen world created by an evil Spirit in contrast to the spiritual world of Christ's.
- ii) denying that being finite implies being evil or corrupt or fallen.

D. The Grammar of the Providence of God [259-46]

1. The topic of the Providence of God must be understood in the context of the following:

The creation itself, under God, has a *beginning, a middle, and an end*.

The creation itself has a beginning that is solely dependent on the free and loving action of God.

The creation has a long middle over which God reigns.

The creation also has an end, understood both as *telos*—aim, goal— and *finis*—conclusion.

Hence, the world is not infinite in time.

In so far as we have affirmed that God has an *interactive life* with the world, we are simply interpreting that God as Triune—as the Creator, the Reconciler, and the Redeemer of the world—is the Alpha and the Omega of all things in heaven and on earth.

Hence, we can affirm, contra deism, that the creation is *open to the action of God within the world*; or negatively, the world is not a sealed and closed causal order simply unto itself and the creatures therein.

If the deistic understanding were to prevail, then all that one could mean by providence is the name for whatever happens in the world.

2. **God the Preserver of the World**

While we do affirm that in the beginning of all time and space, God brought the world into being from absolute nonbeing [*ouk on*], it is also true that God sustains and preserves the world in creaturely being.

Of this sustaining and preserving we can also say God is continually creative, and can therefore affirm this continual creative action of God as *creatio continua*.

God's preservation of the world is God's continuing preserving of the world in its relative and endowed independence in created space and time—preserving a whole cosmos.

3. **God the Governor of the World**

God not only creates in the beginning but God creates in the ongoing bringing to be out of that which has already temporally preceded in being.

As Governor, we can recall what we affirmed in the doctrine of God—the triune Governor has differing ways of interacting and being present to and in the world.

In the mode of being-in-act of the Father, God is the creative ground of the creature's actuality.

In the mode of being-in-act of the Son, God is the encountering presence that meets and guides the creature, that communicates with creature, and confronts the creature from time to time.

In the mode of being-in-act of the Spirit, God empowers the creature's life as a process of becoming and pulls the creature into the future.

Drawing on the work of Keith Ward, notice the various ways God can interact with the world;

- a. particular imaginative shapings of the contingent emergence of the world with ordered and persuasive possibilities;
- b. personal acts relating to persons: self-communications, inspirations, withdrawal, movements of the Spirit;
- c. direct acts affecting emerging probabilities of the creation, such as 'miracles'.

4. **The Providence of God**

The providence of God is God's preservation and governance of the world.

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Yet the grammar of God the Provider is essentially informed by what we know of God and God's purposes in the Triune Actuality of God's life with the world.

Can think of the providence of God as God's management [*oikonomia*] of creation history.

The doctrine of God's providence is, therefore, a Christian construal of the world, confessed and learned on the basis of God's self-communicating with the world in Israel, in Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit.

Hence, seeing God at work in the world is epistemically dependent on the construal power of the language of faith.

5. Another Question

Why not think of the world as God's body as Sallie McFague and some process theologians propose, arguing therewith that *birthing images* can be used and that such would make us appreciate the creation's value were we to think of it so.

My objections to this proposal:

- a. it diminishes the incomparable distinction between God and the world.
- b. it tends to think that only things *divine* will be considered of real value, contradicts the fundamental Xn conviction that creatures as such are of value to God.
- c. the image of birthing is rooted in the act of giving birth to that which is of the same kind as the birthing mother, which is not the case between God and the world.

Note: these objections are not based on some metaphysical principle that says *God cannot be a body*—but God does become a particular human body in Jesus Christ, but the whole world is not the incarnate body of God.

E. Further Issues in the Grammar of God's Action in Relation to the World [264ff]

1. The Problematic Grammar of Traditional Theism [264-270]

This a technical discussion of the understanding of God's causality in traditional theism, and readers are advised to read it as it is in the text. Not easy to summarize.

2. Reconstructing the Grammar of God's Will

There has been a misleading assumption in Xn theology that *whatever God wills to be* in some sense *God causes to be*, which has some unhappy implications and practical applications.

Assuming God's willing is analogous to human intentional willing, it is helpful to distinguish the following distinctions in the ways of God's willing:

- a. *God's Primordial Will*: those large purposes intended in creating and governing a world, including the self-determination to be affected by what God creates and governs.
- b. *God's actual creational positing and preserving of the world* in the beginning and across creational space and time.
- c. *God's permitting will* that endows the creature with relative independence—the creature exist in the midst of other creatures.
- d. *God's covenantal will* is that intentional order of moral and spiritual structures, commands, virtues, and values of right relations among humans, between humans and nonhuman creatures, and between humans and God.
- e. *God's particular direct will* to affect the creature's actuality.

These distinctions now make it intelligible to acknowledge that the creature can act *contrary* to God's primordial will and covenantal will, e.g.

3. God's Interaction with the World [272ff]

This section basically sketches the various ways in which God can be understood to have an interactive life with the world, in which the world can affect God and God is not incapacitated to act upon and in the world. Read the details, basically a repudiation of deistic understanding of God and the world in which God cannot act upon and within the world and the world has no effect on God—which by the way, is a view of God and the world basically presupposed in much modern theology.

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We can now address that cluster of issues emerging around the question of *whether we should suppose that for every event there is a specific divine purpose just for that event.*

If there is such a purpose for every event, then it would seem to authorize and legitimate every *why question* we might ask; e.g., why did God will my baby to die in the accident? But our understanding of God's permitting will is such that God might permit much to happen in the world without supposing that God causally willed a particular event to happen just as it happened.

Yet, in the face of terrible events, the question can be changed from *why did God will this to happen* to *how does God want me/us to respond to this terrible event?*

The assumption is this reconstruction of terrible events is the God is always trying to *bring good out of evil.*

Hence, e.g., 'my baby has died in a car wreck, and how does God want me to respond to this terrible event?' Rather, than 'why did God take my baby?' as though the baby was taken in the wreck, e.g., *in order that I give up drink and get help.*

That sort of grammar is alive and powerful in too much of the churches discourses!

See now the precise grammar of these points stated on pp. 275-76.

F. The Grammar of Evil and Theodicy [276ff]

1. Orienting Notes

It is helpful to note with reference to the so-called *problem of evil* that there are two different senses of *problem*:

- a) evil as a problem of understanding and explanation;
- b) evil as an existential-personal, practical problem of coping with its concrete reality.

Certainly the existential problem has priority in human and Xn life.

But how can we cope effectively with this experienced evil without also raising the question of how we are to understand the nature, status, and causes of evil?

And the existential problem of evil becomes more sharply focused when it involves belief in the reality of one and only one God: how does God relate to the evil?

It is when evil is understood in relation to God that we have the conceptual problem of evil emerge as a *theodicy question*: how can belief in God be justified in the face of evil in the world, or how are we to understand the reality of evil in light of believing in God?

But note: the theodicy question is deeply affected by the grammar of the term 'God' which is being used.

And Xn grammar cannot easily pry apart the existentialist sense of the problem from the conceptual problem of understanding:

- a) what does it mean to call something or event 'evil'? and
- b) how do we understand the status of evil in relation to the triune God?

The proposal herein is that *evil and theodicy cannot be adequately dealt with—either existentially or conceptually—apart from understanding God as the triune Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer of the world.*

[From hereon, these notes will be more sparse, because the text itself is already a compact set of remarks and distinctions that properly should be read and pondered carefully in order to get a fuller grasp of how this grammar works conceptually and existentially.]

2. Sorting the Grammar of Evil

In theological traditions there are three definitions of evil that are prominent:

- a) evil as the privation of good;
- b) evil as harm to some creature's good;
- c) evil as that which is contrary to the will of God.

I am proposing that we think of evil as harm to some creature's good.

3. Sorting the Grammar of the Agents and Causes of Evil

Among the agents and causes of evil we can identify the following:

a) nonhuman creaturely agents and causes

The many ways in which creatures and clusters of creatures cause harm to other creatures. Think of earthquakes, storms, nonhuman creatures eating other creatures. Impute no intentionality or decision-making to such.

b) human agents

Sometimes helps to distinguish between those human actions that 1) cause harm inadvertently and those that 2) intend to harm another creature.

Will here be mainly concerned about actions that violate God's covenantal will and thereby afflict other humans with harm to their good.

c) transpersonal powers—force fields of power—principalities and powers

Such powers transcend the power of any single human agency but deeply affect and often afflict harm on humans and other creatures.

It is possible to understand the destructive actions of such powers as *demonic*.

4. On Distinguishing Natural Evil and Moral Evil

Natural Evil can be defined negatively as that evil brought about by nonmoral causal agency.

Moral Evil is that evil done by humans—or by humans in complicity with transpersonal powers—that violate the covenantal will of God.

The conceptual precondition of such actions is that they arise out of human finite freedom—to be explored in the next chapter on Human Being.

Hence, the most serious contrasts between *good and evil* bear on the evil that humans afflict on each other and on themselves in violation of God's covenantal will.

The meaning of such evil is what we will also call *sin* and is that which is *contrary to the will of God*, meaning thereby the covenantal will of God.

5. Formulating Theodicy Issues

a) The formulation in terms of classical theism and its critics [283]

b) The critique of classical theism by process theism [284]

Basic problem with both: neither is a full trinitarian discussion and operate on the assumption that theodicy issues can be addressed in terms of nontrinitarian theism.

6. Trinitarian Theodicy [285-6]

Read these two pages carefully.

Short form: ***trinitarianly understood, evil is permitted by God, engaged by God, and finally defeated by God: God the creator of all things; God the Reconciler; and God the Redeemer.***

Questions welcomed.

7. Creaturely Pain and Suffering [287-290]

Systematic theology as practical theology engaging how we now might talk and think about pain and suffering and even the suffering of God—read carefully and slowly.

G. Creation Pragmatics [290-92]

An exploration of those practices of living faithfully in the light of the grammar of God as Creator developed in this chapter, though other chapters will explore related practices and the grammar of those practices.

In affirming that human creatures exist a gift of God and therefore human life is not meaningless or pointless, no matter how painful it might be or have become. Existing before the Creator who creates us in love and understood in hope as our Redeemer is good and to be cherished.

Creation belief entails practices of protecting life from harm and seeking ways to build up life and encouraging flourishing before God, whereby 'flourishing' is not reduced to some nontheological idea of the 'good life'.

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Creation belief entails the profound awareness of the deep interconnections and dependencies of human life upon world of creatures that are not-human.

Includes being aware of other creatures as having a good before God that is not dependent on their being good for humans—animals for food, etc. is to be done with gratitude and thanksgiving, and never as a human right.

Includes awareness of the ecological harm being done by human life upon the future conditions of the creation and the responsible practices of limiting such harm.

Read further.