

Module HPRS7021: The Doctrine of the Trinity

Assignment Three: Essay

To what extent, if at all, is the Doctrine of the Trinity significant in understanding the Doctrine of Creation?

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“In the creation bethink thee, first, I pray thee, of the original cause of all things that are made, the Father; of the creative cause, the Son; of the perfecting cause, the Spirit”.¹ The triune God – Father, Son and Spirit – is the Creator of all that exists apart from Godself. This belief is central to the Christian Doctrine of Creation. As this essay will show, the Doctrine of the Trinity is intimately connected to and highly significant in understanding the Doctrine of Creation. Two aspects in particular will be discussed: God’s creation of all that is *ex nihilo* and the activity of all persons of the Godhead in creation.

I. “One God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth”: God the Triune Creator

First, and most simply, the Doctrine of the Trinity is significant in understanding the Doctrine of Creation because creation is the work of the Triune God. The two are inextricably linked. Reflection on the Doctrine of Creation necessarily involves reflection on the identity of the Creator as well as his relationship to creation. So Webster, “the starting point for a Christian doctrine of creation, as for any Christian doctrine, is God in himself.”² Significantly, Webster claims that God must be the starting point. It is important for theologians such as Webster that such theological reflection be grounded in the identity and movement of the Triune Creator God *in se* before it proceeds to consideration of God’s *opera ad extra*. Emery recognises this emphasis on the ‘proper’ order of such reflection in Aquinas also:

“For Thomas, creation and salvation are illuminated from within the doctrine of God himself. One does not take God’s action seriously by allowing his relations to the world to condition him, but, rather, one discovers the source of the economy by contemplating the immanent and transcendent being of God.”³

One must begin then, with the Doctrine of God, the God who is both three and one, before attempting to understand the Doctrine of Creation. As Aquinas wrote: “the knowledge of

¹ Basil of Caesarea, *De Spiritu Sancto*, XVI.38, trans. in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. VIII (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 23, cited in David A.S. Fergusson, *The Cosmos and the Creator: An Introduction to the Theology of Creation* (London: SPCK, 1997), 30.

²John Webster, “Trinity and Creation”, *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12 (2010), 9.

³ Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 43.

the divine persons was necessary for us... for the right idea of creation.”⁴ This essay will proceed along these grounds, moving from the identity of the Triune God to discover what that means for the Doctrine of Creation. Two aspects of the Doctrine of Creation in particular will be considered: God’s creation of the world *ex nihilo*, and the activity of all persons of the Godhead in creation.

II. “out of things that are not He makes whatever He pleases”⁵: The Triune God and Creation *ex nihilo*

One central aspect of the Christian Doctrine of Creation is the belief that God brought the universe into being out of nothing rather than simply forming it from pre-existent matter. Belief in creation *ex nihilo* is deeply connected to, indeed perhaps requires, the Doctrine of the Trinity. Here, the eternal processions within the triune Godhead are significant. God is Father, Son and Spirit from all eternity, but God was not always Creator. This means that ““Before” God creates at all, he is Father”⁶ and it is therefore *as* Father that God creates.⁷ Indeed, one could go so far as to say that it is *because* God is Father that he is able to create. Thomas Torrance summarises this well:

In virtue of his intrinsic and eternal Fatherhood God always had the power to create, and did actually create because he was and is the Father of the Son. Expressed otherwise, since God is Father in himself, as Father of the Son, he is essentially generative or fruitful in his own Being, and it is because he is inherently productive as Father that God could and did freely become Creator or Source of all being beyond himself.”⁸

⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a.32.1 ad 3. trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 2nd, rev. ed., 1920. Online: <http://www.newadvent.org/summa>.

⁵ Theophilus of Antioch, *To Autolycus* II, 4, trans. Marcus Dods in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 2, (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885). Online: <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/02042.htm>.

⁶ T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark: London, 2016), 30.

⁷cf. the discussion in Iain R. Torrance, “The Trinity in Relation to Creation and Incarnation,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 38, (1996): 29-37 and Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 209ff.

⁸ Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God*, 209.

The eternal generation of the Son from the Father in the triune Godhead is the ground for, and is mirrored in, God's act of creation. Barth speaks of creation as the "temporal analogue, taking place outside God, of that event in God himself by which God is the Father of the Son."⁹

However, it is of vital importance to distinguish between the eternal relationship of begetting and God's act of creation. This distinction was central to the development of the doctrine of the Trinity over against Arianism: the Father's generation of the Son is intrinsic rather than transitive meaning that "generation and creation are properly speaking entirely different kinds of divine acts."¹⁰ The first is from the being of God, the second an act of God's will. This fundamental difference between the activity of God *ad intra* and the work of the Trinity *ad extra* entails that fact that God did not need to create. The life of God within the triune Godhead is so entirely self-sufficient that it cannot be said that God creates out of need. This means that God's relationship to his creation is entirely gratuitous, or, in other words, "Creation is grace."¹¹ God does not *need* to create, rather he *wills* to create. Here we are faced with the question of creation as an act of God's will or of God's love. Process theology typically rejects the idea of creation as a free act of God's will as it implies that divine creativity is not a necessary part of God's being and existence.¹² And if God is eternally loving, relational, and creative then there must be from all eternity something or someone to whom God relates lovingly and creatively. The world is therefore understood to be co-eternal with God. God's creative activity is then not the creation of all things *ex nihilo* but rather "seek[ing] to create within the universe values which correspond to the divine being... the creation of order out of chaos."¹³ However, this essentially denies the Doctrine of Creation¹⁴ and complicates the relationship between Creator and creation. Beginning with the Doctrine of the Trinity leads us from the self-sufficiency of God within himself to his free and gracious act of creation: an act of love. It is not necessary to pit divine freedom and divine love against one another. Rather, one can understand creation as

⁹ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (trans. G. T. Thomson; London: SCM Press, 2001), 43.

¹⁰ Webster, "Trinity and Creation," 10.

¹¹ Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 45.

¹² Fergusson, *Cosmos and Creator*, 32.

¹³ Fergusson, *Cosmos and Creator*, 32.

¹⁴ Fergusson, *Cosmos and Creator*, 33.

a free act of divine love. Webster's definition of the divine will is helpful here: "properly speaking, it signifies determination to act according to nature, and so to act with supreme generosity in accord with and on the basis of God's eternal love of himself in the procession of Son and Spirit from the Father."¹⁵ The significance of God as Trinity for God's free and loving act of creation is clear:

"The goodness of the Father towards creation reflects the love that the Father has from all eternity for the Son in the Spirit, and which is rendered back to the Father by the Son in the Spirit. Creation is thus consistent with the eternal love and being of God. It is not a random act of will but a free expression of the personal love within the triune being."¹⁶

Precisely because of God's nature as Trinity, creation can be understood as a free and loving divine act by which something other than God is brought into existence, *ex nihilo*. And God as triune Creator requires no mediatory figure in his creation of the world, as Gunton so clearly draws out of Irenaeus' imagery of God's two hands in creation: "Because God created by means of his own Son and Spirit, he is unlike the deities of the Gnostics and the One of neoplatonism in that he does not require beings intermediate between himself and the world in order to achieve his ends."¹⁷ Because of God's triune nature, there can be a total distinction between the Creator and his creation, with no intermediary figure necessary. God, who is Father, Son and Spirit, created all things out of nothing in a free and gracious act of love, entirely in keeping with his nature. It is to God's act of creation specifically as Father, Son and Spirit that we now turn.

III. "by the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Ghost"¹⁸: The Activity of All Persons of the Godhead in Creation

According to the Doctrine of the Trinity, God is eternally Father, Son and Spirit. Therefore, it is as Father, Son and Spirit that God creates. Webster cautions here that "What is said of

¹⁵ Webster, "Trinity and Creation," 15.

¹⁶ Fergusson, *Cosmos and Creator*, 34.

¹⁷ Colin E. Gunton, *The Triune Creator A Historical and Systematic Study* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), 54.

¹⁸ Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 20, 9, trans. John Gibb, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, vol. VII (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888). Online: <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1701020.htm>.

external trinitarian operation [should be] in accord with what has already been said of immanent essence and processions.”¹⁹ Whilst one can appropriate specific acts *ad extra* in terms of creation to a particular divine person, it must be kept in mind that the Trinity acts indivisibly and that neither Father, Son, nor Spirit can be defined apart from their shared divine essence.²⁰ Such an emphasis on both the unity of God and the activity of each person of the Godhead in creation can be seen in the work of Irenaeus:

“Thus then there is shown forth One God, the Father, not made, invisible, creator of all things; above whom there is no other God, and after whom there is no other God. And, since God is rational, therefore by (the) Word He created the things that were made; and God is Spirit, and by (the) Spirit He adorned all things... Since then the Word establishes, that is to say, gives body and grants the reality of being, and the Spirit gives order and form to the diversity of the powers; rightly and fittingly is the Word called the Son, and the Spirit the Wisdom of God.”²¹

The activity of the divine persons in creation could be summarised thus: the Father is the one to whom “the act of creation may be eminently assigned”;²² the Son, or the Word of God, is “the exemplary and efficient cause of creation”;²³ and the Spirit, or Wisdom of God, “creation’s perfecting cause.”²⁴ Often, particularly in the theology of the Western Church, far more attention has been given to the role of Father and Son in creation, to the neglect of the Spirit. Fergusson sees this as an unfortunate effect of the identification of Wisdom, Word and Son in the New Testament.²⁵ However, the role of the Spirit (רוח) in creation is clear in the Old Testament and was less neglected by the Eastern Church.²⁶ More recently, theologians such as Gunton have recognised the significance of the role of the Spirit in creation: “ God creates freely, out of love, but it is a love which leaves the creature something to be and do: to live in time, to praise its creator and to return, perfected, to the

¹⁹ Webster, “Trinity and Creation,” 15.

²⁰ Webster, “Trinity and Creation,” 15-16.

²¹ St. Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* (trans. Armitage Robinson; London: SPCK, 1920), 73-74. Online: <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/irenaeus/demonstr/demonstr.iv.html>.

²² Webster, “Trinity and Creation,” 17.

²³ Webster, “Trinity and Creation,” 18.

²⁴ Webster, “Trinity and Creation,” 18.

²⁵ Fergusson, *Cosmos and Creator*, 30.

²⁶ Fergusson, *Cosmos and Creator*, 30.

one who made it.”²⁷ Creation is not simply brought into being and then abandoned by God, rather it is brought to its goal through the perfecting work of the Spirit. Here we see that an appropriately trinitarian focus on the activity of each of the divine persons in creation has implications for our understanding of the Doctrine of Creation in terms of the relationship between Creator and creatures as well as the goal or purpose of creation:

“The creature is not created and abandoned. Throughout, we have seen that this is never the path of God’s love. Instead, the creature is creatively upheld and sustained in its existence beyond its own power in a relationship which both respects its freedom and brings it to its true purpose...God the Father, through the work of the Son and the Spirit, constantly maintains and restores his creation’s movement toward perfection.”²⁸

Concluding Remarks

From the above discussion it is clear that the Doctrine of the Trinity has great significance for an understanding of the Doctrine of Creation. Firstly, only by holding to a fully trinitarian understanding of God can one properly think of creation *ex nihilo*. Furthermore, when the activity of each person of the Godhead in creation is considered, the true goal and purpose of creation can be more clearly seen. All that exists outside of Godself “subsist[s] by the will of the Father, [is] brought into being by the operation of the Son, and perfected by the presence of the Spirit.”²⁹

²⁷ Colin E. Gunton, *Christ and Creation* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1992), 77 cited by Torrance, “The Trinity in Relation to Creation and Incarnation,” 36.

²⁸ Torrance, “The Trinity in Relation to Creation and Incarnation,” 36.

²⁹ Basil of Caesarea, *De Spiritu Sancto*, XVI.38, trans. in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. VIII, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983, 23 cited in Fergusson, *Cosmos and Creator*, 30.

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