



The Doctrine of Creation: Not an Appendix but the First Article*

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To assert that the doctrine of creation is not a loosely attached postscript to the article on Jesus Christ—a sort of appendix—implies that there are some who do claim that it is just such a postscript. Against any such claim we want to insist that creation belongs in the *first* article of the Creed and serves as the basis for the following two articles. The doctrine of creation is the foundation. A foundation cannot be added afterwards; it cannot be an appendage to faith in Christ and in the Spirit.

I. THE ROOTS OF NEGLECT

We all know that the conscious neglect of the first article of the Creed has been a fact for a long time in the church and in theology. Indeed, the doctrine of creation has not only been neglected; it has been the object of pointed opposition ever since the 1920s, especially on the part of Karl Barth and his disciples. But the source of this negative attitude lies much farther back in time and is associated with the conditions under which Pietism and the revival movements arose in Europe. The roots of today's situation lie back in the 1600s, in the era of national churches and the absolutism of rulers.

Even back in this period the doctrine of creation had its independent status on the simple grounds that it was needed in connection with the teaching concerning the state, the authorities, *iustitia civilis*, the law's "political use," etc. The public use of force, and especially the element of violence in the exercise of force, required a motivation that differed from the Christian teaching in general, where of course the gospel of Christ and the commandment about mercy toward the sinner had to be allowed to dominate.¹

*Translated from Swedish by Edgar M. Carlson.

¹It is typical of Luther that he develops his teaching concerning the punishing function of government in an exposition of the Sermon on the Mount's teaching of unlimited forgiveness. Government is not to follow the Sermon on the Mount, but is to do the precise *opposite*, that is, to retaliate, punish, and smite. See *D. Martin Luthers Werke* (Weimar: Herman Bohlaus Nachfolger, 1883-) 32.382 (1530-32). Hereafter cited as *WA*.

All church denominations—Roman, Lutheran, and Calvinist—construct a view of the power-structure in society which is theologically grounded, one in which the Old Testament and the article about creation constitute the groundwork. But in Lutheranism the tension between the first article of the Creed and the second article is exceptionally strong, sometimes almost unbearable. This is so because the point of departure in Luther's personal proclamation of the antithesis between law and gospel is more sharply focused than in any other church. This had

consequences later when Pietism came on the scene. The pious group of truly converted people preferred to gather around “Jesus only.”

The government authorities condemned and persecuted these pietistic groups, and they did it in close cooperation with the church authorities. This cooperation was based directly on arguments dealing with the Creator’s work in the community and on the law’s “political use.” In this situation it is self-evident that the doctrine of creation will be uncoupled from any representation of personal piety, faith, decision, sanctification, etc. Already in this early period the term “creation” came to be tainted with some entirely different conceptions of a political nature. The term could be easily coupled together with authoritarian patterns of administration, oppression, and unfreedom.

This unfortunate linkage of “creation” and dictatorial tendencies appeared again in a very acute form when National Socialism triumphed in Germany and when “German Christians” built up a theology which seized upon the biblical idea of *Schöpfung* (creation) in a most unconstrained manner. Karl Barth formulated a Christological dogmatics which was intended to stand as an antipole to the National Socialist doctrine of “creation.” There Christ is set forth in contradiction to the self-glorifying Aryan person who believes that he has been created to lord it over other people.

In a way that is not entirely clear, but which is heavily saturated with emotion, the contrast between Christ and the political tyranny slid over in Barth into a contrast between Christology and the doctrine of creation. When the content of the second article is expounded, it is done in a manner which is polemical toward the first article. Specifically, it is polemical against the external arrangement of the three articles—the placement of the doctrine of creation *first*, before the doctrine of Christ.

In Barth’s discussion an entirely different factor comes into the foreground, something which is new when compared to Pietism. That new factor is the sequence in which we *acquire knowledge*. We get no knowledge of God by observing nature. Barth polemicizes against any talk about a “natural” knowledge of God. It is really in this polemic about theories of knowledge that Barth’s negative attitude toward the placement of the first article of the Creed in the first spot has its deepest basis.

If we look anywhere else than to Jesus Christ to learn anything about God, what we arrive at will be a false god; our religion will be idolatry, the worship of false gods. But it is the second article which talks about Christ, which therefore for Barth has to be the base and foundation for the Christian doctrine of creation. In a number of shorter writings, all of which have exceedingly revealing titles, Barth draws the consequences of this view. In each of these works, the dominating question is the question of knowledge, How do we acquire knowledge?

Inasmuch as the law becomes fully clear when the gospel has been revealed, the gospel has priority over the law. Therefore *Evangelium und Gesetz* (“Gospel and Law”) was the title of a short volume by Barth in the 1930s (Theologische Existenz Heute 32; München: Kaiser, 1935). Inasmuch as justice in social ordering, according to Barth, can be fully comprehended only from the position of the person’s justification before God, justification by grace alone has priority over justice. In this way what in the Lutheran interpretation is the law’s “political use” is completely negated and set aside. This occurs in a small publication having the title *Rechtfertigung und*

Recht (Theologische Studien 1; Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1938). And finally, in the pamphlet *Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde* (Theologische Studien 20; Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1946),² Barth claims that the church alone knows what the basis is on which the state rests. The state knows nothing about the foundation on which its own existence is based.

The consequence is that the state has no knowledge about the good but must get its insights into the right course of action from the church. This unheard of claim to a monopoly on knowledge is expressed in very clear language in the above writings, as well as in the major dogmatic work, *Church Dogmatics* (4 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark and New York: Scribners, 1936-69).

The theses that are advanced resemble very much the proclamations of the Roman church in the late middle ages. Rome too subordinated the worldly authorities under the pope. But actually the thesis concerning the supremacy over the state in the case of Rome is much less pretentious. The claim to supremacy is balanced by the doctrine of natural rights, a doctrine which acknowledges that the natural reason of a person, as such, has some access to the knowledge of God and of the good. This balancing factor is totally lacking in Barth. He rejects every thought of a natural law.

This Barthian procedure of the rank-ordering of items in experience—based on the principle, “In what order does the person gain *knowledge* about them?”—is certainly not something to be accepted as self-evident. It takes quite a long time for a newborn infant to gain full insight into what it means to breathe, but the infant breathes from the very first moment of life. It is thanks to this on-going activity, about which the child has no knowledge, that the child *lives*. And to live is something larger and more important than having knowledge. In the ancient church, which formulated our Creed with its three articles, people had not yet focused their attention on the contrast which Barth puts in the center, the contrast between having knowledge and not having knowledge. They saw instead the contrast of *death* standing over against *life*.

Breathing is more important than knowledge about breathing. The term “revelation” is the organizing factor in Barth’s dogmatics, which is to say that it is governed by a principle which is not central in the biblical texts. The role of healing and health, the curing of the sick, the raising from the dead, etc., in the gospels all witness to the fact that the triumph of life over death is there understood to be the decisive victory, much more important than the victory of

²See further G. Wingren, *Creation and Law* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1961) 13, where other writings of Barth are also mentioned.

knowledge over ignorance. It is this contrast—the conflict between life and death—which is the background for the tripartite symbol and its unique historical development in the primitive church.

II. A CREED OF THREE ARTICLES

Irenaeus of Lyons and his battle against the Gnostics is of particular interest in this connection. What Irenaeus had to fight against was a belief in Jesus which is combined with a rejection of the proposition that it is the Father of Jesus Christ who created the world. The God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ has nothing to do with the creation of the world—the

physical, the material. It is an evil god, Demiurge, who is the source of our bodies. The same evil God is responsible for the holy book of the Jews, “the Old Testament,” a disgusting book, filled with cruelties. As Irenaeus pursues his battle against Gnosticism, he is also, at the same time, saying “Yes” to creation and to the Old Testament.

We have the Gnostics to thank for the fact that the Christian church as early as the second century received its two basic documents: a Bible with two Testaments, and a Creed with three articles. The Bible begins with the story of creation in Genesis and ends with the resurrection of the dead and eternal life in the book of Revelation. The same is true of the tripartite Creed: there is recounted in summary form a succession of events which is the same list of divine deeds about which the Bible tells us—and in the same order. The deeds are recounted in the order which is the order of *God’s* actions. To rearrange all of this, and let the principle, “How do we *come to know* who God is?” determine the arrangement, would be to put *us* and not God in the center.

This is the surprising thesis presented in Benkt-Erik Benktson’s suggestive doctoral dissertation on Karl Barth, 1948.³ The main problem for Barth—that around which everything revolves—is the question of human *capacity*, especially the human capacity for *knowledge*. The tripartite Creed, on the other hand, is a song of praise for God’s deeds. It is a song of praise that extols God himself above all his deeds. The song of praise arranges these wonderful works of God in the order which God chooses when he *does* them. Of course the singer of these praises knows that our human knowledge of God increases and becomes clearer when we meet Christ. But to sing our praises in accord with the principle that matters should be ranked in the order in which we acquire knowledge about them is to introduce a sort of anthropocentricity into the paean of praise itself.

For that matter, if the degree of clarity in our knowledge were to be the basic principle for the inner structuring of our confession of faith, we ought to start with the *third* article, not with the second! In heaven we shall see clearly; the resurrection from the dead banishes all darkness. In the fellowship with Christ which we have in faith (second article) we do not yet “see” (1 Cor 5:7), but then “we shall see face to face” (1 Cor 13:12; 1 John 3:2). If we make the order of our acquisition of knowledge the principle according to which the Creed is to be arranged, to be consistent we should begin with the *termination* of the

³Unfortunately Benktson’s book on Barth is available only in Swedish, *Den naturliga teologiens problem hos Karl Barth* (Lund: Carl Bloms Boktryckeri, 1948). See especially pp. 122-129, where the main thesis is established.

divine action; then the confessional text would no longer be a song of praise to anyone except oneself. This is further evidence that, in this case as in many others, when we place the human and his capacity in the center we end up in *theologia gloriae*.

Irenaeus begins with creation and then continues with the incarnation in the Son, in order that the whole may be seen as the restoration of creation (*recapitulatio*). The Apostles’ Creed follows the same order. It is clear that the structure of the Creed is determined by the struggle against the Gnostics. The Creed confesses what the Gnostics deny. Thus it holds together creation and redemption as one and refuses to sever them one from the other as the Gnostics did. Therefore also it holds together the “Testaments”—the Old and the New. It allows them to become a unity instead of tearing them apart and regarding them as two unreconcilable segments.

Thus, the Creed holds together what the Gnostics tear apart. We need to take note of the fact that this concern for the Old Testament and the song of praise concerning creation found in the Creed are basically one and the same thing. The first article on creation is, in fact, a citation out of the Old Testament, and not just any citation! It is the message from the very first verse in the Old Testament, Genesis 1:1, the message that God has “created heaven and earth.” The Hebrew language does not have a single word to designate the universe as a whole. Instead it speaks of “heaven and earth.” Of this message one has a word for word echo in the first article of the Creed. With this citation the content of the Old Testament is included and safeguarded. The Creed can then proceed to the incarnation in the second article.

It is not necessary to mention names: Abraham, Moses, Israel. To mention *creation* is enough. We perceive this to be a peculiar reduction of Israel’s holy book. We would like to insert some words about the deliverance out of Egypt and from Babylonia. When the Creed took form, the young Christian church was engaged in two conflicts; it did battle on two fronts. The Gnostics were the deadly enemies. They denied creation and thereby also denied the participation of the body in salvation, the resurrection—everything. Against this deadly enemy the first article is placed *first*. There is the sound of a battle fanfare about this placement. The synagogue is also an opponent. From that direction comes the denial that the crucified Jesus can be the Messiah, the Christ.

The Jewish people’s demand that the Messiah have earthly power became a problem for the young Christian church. If one awaits a political Messiah and on that ground rejects the Crucified One, then whether one should hold on to old Israel’s national triumphs and the celebration of Easter as an earthly freedom festival becomes highly questionable from the viewpoint of the Christian faith. It is of course in this political expectation that the “No” of the Jewish people to Jesus has its roots. The resurrection on the third day represents a break with the expectations of the old Israel.⁴ Now begins a life “outside the camp,” in disgrace, in martyrdom, in world mission (Heb 13:13).

⁴See G. Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation: A Study in the Biblical Theology of Irenaeus* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1959) 162-63. This is underscored even more forcibly in my new book on Irenaeus which appeared in 1983, *Människan och kristen: En bok om Irenaeus* (Stockholm: Verbum, 1983), for example, on pp. 28-35 and 89-92. For the present this book is available in Swedish only.

The first chapter of Genesis does not deal with the people of Israel but with humanity in general, with the human, with Adam. These are the portions which the early church considered to be so important that they had to be inserted into that Creed of which the central part had to do with Jesus Christ. “Creation” and “gospel”—these two words can be set as rubrics over the tripartite confession as a whole. Creation is placed first, the gospel comes later, in articles two and three. Two articles are needed for the “gospel”: one which recounts the external course of events connected with the gospel (the second article), and one which begins with Pentecost’s outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the gospel, and ends with the heavenly life (the third article).

In all of this, the Creed is trying to follow the biblical book with its two Testaments. The three articles represent and reproduce the total content of the Bible. Genesis provides the beginning in creation; the accounts in the four gospels, from birth to ascension, are compressed

into the participial forms in the second article; and then follows with complete consistency the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, as the Acts of the Apostles follows immediately after the Fourth Gospel. There the third article takes over and continues all the way to the Revelation to John whose message is the word about the triumph of eternal life over death.

Although this is the structure of the Creed, one cannot find a written basis for it in the New Testament. As is well known, this is what Oscar Cullmann attempts in his influential work on earliest Christian confessions.⁵ He does find, of course, a purely Christological confession: Jesus is Lord (Rom 10:9, Phil 2:11). The Creed confesses what the opponents deny. What the Jews say “No” to is the Christian message that Jesus is Lord and Messiah. In this conflict there was no need for asserting that God had created the world because on that matter the Jews and the Christians were at one. Creation is confessed when creation is *denied*, that is in the struggle against the Gnostics.

But this does not imply that creation is a secondary item of faith, an appendage at a later time. The situation is quite the reverse. The creation article is living already for Jesus and his apostles; it exists unexpressed as something that is self-evident before all else. Moreover, it is expressed by every Jew every day in the daily Jewish devotion, which certainly Jesus also observed. What the Gnostics deny is a truth which lies “before” the gospel, that which is the basis and foundation of *all* that follows. The right location of this truth is before the gospel, therefore before the second article. That is where the article on creation now stands and where it will stand through all ages.

Systematic theology as pursued at the university encounters certain difficulties when it undertakes an evaluation of early confessional documents such as the Apostles’ Creed. When the systematician raises the question of whether the text of the Creed is in agreement with the content of the Bible and seeks an

⁵Oscar Cullmann, *Die ersten christlichen Glaubensbekenntnisse* (Theologische Studien 25; Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1943) 33; English translation, *The Earliest Christian Confessions* (London: Lutterworth, 1949). In addition Cullmann draws some very comprehensive conclusions from his findings (drawn exclusively from the New Testament).

orientation toward the Bible with the help of the exegete, the systematician finds no exegesis which can serve as an adequate guide. The exegetical specialists busy themselves either with Old Testament texts (this is a discipline by itself at the university) or with New Testament texts (which is another discipline).

To be sure, the New Testament exegete talks now and then about Old Testament texts, but when that happens, the subject is generally not the text itself but the New Testament interpretation of the Old Testament citation. An exegete who wants to be viewed as a scholar does not ask or make assertions about the historically correct implications of Genesis 1:1 in relation to John 1:1-5; he or she does not enter upon the question of whether the writer of the Fourth Gospel is right or wrong in his interpretation of Genesis 1:1. This is a “religious,” non-scholarly question. So it appears to the modern exegete. Here we confront a typical modern attitude toward the biblical text. It is an attitude that did not exist in earlier times. As a professor, Luther was *doctor biblicus*; he lectured sometimes on Old Testament biblical books and sometimes on New Testament books.

Modern exegesis makes it more difficult to identify the belief in creation as something *Christian*. Alongside the tendency of the revival movements to assemble everything around faith in Jesus in an individualistic manner, and along with Barth's theologically motivated negativism over against the first article of the Creed, we must also add the modern exegetical bifurcation as a cause of this unusual "deficiency-disease." Church bodies are not getting any real support from theology. They fumble after a basis for the doctrine of creation but receive only flawed answers from the theologians. This fumbling is taking place in a situation that is marked by *theological poverty*; what is now incontrovertibly needed on purely practical grounds is a *renaissance of the first article*.

III. THE NEED FOR A RENAISSANCE OF THE FIRST ARTICLE

When a society increases its assets due to unbroken economic growth, organizational flaws in the society may be equated with flaws in the way the gains are parceled out. Some who were rich already increase their riches while the poor participate only slightly in the gains which their work has contributed to the total community. In this situation there is often a demand that there be a change in the distribution. This way of viewing the problem fits very well with a Christian social ethic based on the second article: Jesus prompts us to serve our neighbor. That is all. No question is raised about the economic growth itself. The more technology triumphs over nature, the more there will be to distribute among all citizens.

The situation is radically different when the technical reconstitution of nature threatens to destroy those resources which are the very basis of our existence, and to do so not only for us but for all coming generations. Love for the neighbor does not cease to be the driving force for Christian action in the community, but it is expanded to include also air, water, earth, plant and animal life, riches which ought to be available for *all*, and which ought to be fairly distributed among all, from generation to generation. That is the problem with which we live *now*. We have in fact been living with these problems for a long

time, and it is at this point that theology and the church have been fumbling with regard to their position.⁶

Many people who are not Christians have awakened to these problems and would like to do something about them, even at the cost of inconvenience to themselves. They are willing to lower their own economic standard if this should be needed. This is a politically divisive situation and puts the spotlight on all the world's people and countries. The western world as a whole gives the appearance of a single large super-class, ruthlessly using up the natural resources of the third world. If we are to surmount the theological problems which arise in relation to these issues, it is clear that using the second article alone as a point of departure is not enough. The situation cries out for a doctrine of *creation*. It is now apparent, in a new way, that it is meaningful to place the Old Testament in its proper place in the Bible, namely before the New Testament.

In their search for a faith-foundation for their engagement with these entirely new societal problems, people have already begun to turn to other religions than the Christian, religions in which nature plays a decisive role. Christianity is perceived to be hostile to nature. What is being reacted to negatively in this situation is a tendency in the attitude of the Christian churches

toward the body. This tendency is an unbiblical element derived from Greek philosophy, which already in the early medieval period got a strong foothold in European theology. The idea of an active divine creation of matter is entirely lacking in Plato and Aristotle. Body and soul oppose one another as that which is lower and that which is higher. The good consists of the spirit's liberation from the lower, that is, from the body.

Such views are flagrantly at odds with the Old Testament view of creation, of the body, earth, water, and the sources of our life. But if one cuts away the Old Testament part of the biblical book and isolates the New Testament, and if one emphasizes especially the warnings in the apostolic letters about living "in the world," then one can without too much difficulty combine this mutilated Bible with the Greek contrast of body and spirit. This is in fact what has happened in the European church ever since the fourth century.

IV. CONTRIBUTIONS FROM IRENAEUS AND LUTHER

Irenaeus lived before this merger of the Greek and the Christian. His chief enemies are the Gnostics who sever the unity of the body and the spirit and do so more radically than Plato and Aristotle. The body is created by an evil creator-god, Demiurge, say the Gnostics; it is he who speaks in the Old Testament. When the good Saviour-god reveals himself in Jesus, the body is shoved aside and is not included in salvation. Christ has not healed the sick, he has not bodily died and risen again, and he has not given any promise of a future resurrection

⁶The Danish theologian, Ole Jensen, has devoted a large part of his extensive writings to this problem. Basic is his doctoral dissertation, *Theologie zwischen Illusion und Restriktion* (Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie 71; München: Kaiser, 1975). In addition, there is his *I vaektens vold: økologie og religion* (Copenhagen: Fremad, 1977) and *Frem til naturen* (Copenhagen: Fremad, 1980), plus a number of smaller writings and papers.

in which the body is also to have a part. It is in this historical situation, and against this "nature-hostile" opposition, that Irenaeus constructs his theology with *recapitulation* at its center.

For Irenaeus, salvation is the same as the realization of God's original purpose with creation as stated in Genesis 1:26-31. This is the basic conception which is reflected in the double external arrangement which is characteristic of the second century, such as: one Bible with two Testaments, one Creed with three articles. All of Christianity, in all parts of the world, has as a matter of fact preserved this arrangement at the same time that the churches have hidden and obscured the actual implications of it. Influences from Greek philosophy have spread from Europe to all countries, and these have been superimposed on the original and simple theological structure.⁷ What is needed now is *a renaissance of Irenaeus*.

Irenaeus can teach us better than anyone what it means to have the Old Testament where it is—in front of the New Testament. He can teach us what it means to have the first article, on creation, where it is—before the two following articles on the gospel. And because he teaches us this, he can also teach us how to *act theologically in the present*, namely, by entering into a direct encounter with the problems of the day—the new theological problems in which concern for creation and concern for the neighbor have grown together and become one and the same thing. Today's church bodies face these tasks without theological guidance. They need help. They can find help from the greatest theologian of the young and undivided church, Irenaeus of Lyons.

But it is difficult to gain access to him and to his thought world; he is too far removed

from us in time. Too many systems of thought have crowded in between him and us: scholasticism, the Reformation, the revivals, and the Enlightenment. One who constitutes a specific problem in this connection is Luther. This is so because while he also wanted to preserve faith in the Creator, concern for nature and the body, he had to do it in a situation that involved confrontation with a church which constituted a worldly power-apparatus and which possessed great worldly riches. Irenaeus was surrounded by heathen princes on all sides. No one holding power, no government in the second century, confessed itself to be Christian.

Luther had to do something which Irenaeus did not have to do. He had to take earthly power away from the church and give the external power over the resources of nature to the earthly authorities which the Creator himself had instituted to govern “bodies” on earth. To this arena Luther assigns God’s work through the *law*, the “worldly regime.” The church’s only task is to *proclaim the gospel*, the “spiritual regime.” Luther’s teaching concerning the two kingdoms places the body and external affairs under the rubric of *law*, a fateful novelty which little by little led to negative consequences for the Lutheran churches.

This separation of existence into two parts did not exist in the early church. For Irenaeus the line runs directly from the gospel to the body. Baptism and Eucharist yield *resurrection*, not only forgiveness for the harassed conscience. The point in what is said about the restoration of creation (*recapitulatio*) is that everything which God has created has a part in the salvation which God

⁷Cf. O. Jensen, *Theologie zwischen Illusion und Restriktion*, 267-277.

gives in Christ. The great antithesis is between death and life, not between guilt and forgiveness. Therefore, paradoxically, Irenaeus is really closer to us than Luther is.⁸

Nevertheless, it is actually the case that Luther also in his doctrine of “the two regimes”—which is somewhat foreign in our present framework—does talk about creation as gift, the concealed and obscured gospel in nature. In view of the form which the debate has now taken, it is incumbent upon us to bring forth some statements of Luther of this sort. Thereafter it will be in order for us to analyze the complications in which the doctrine of the spiritual and the worldly regimes involve us.

As the giver of the good, God is, according to Luther, sovereign over against the human. Persons have no possibility of bringing to a halt the work of creation even when they appear to be diabolical in their actions. In an often cited passage, sometimes by armament-obsessed advocates of nuclear weapons, Luther says, “If the world should go under, God would create a new world.” Whenever Luther talks about God’s action in creation, the main emphasis is always on his sovereignty. The human is the trustee but does not own anything. Therefore we have the responsibility of trustees—that and no more. If in our striving we seek to act counter to the outgoing and enriching thrust of the work of creation, instead of willingly following along with it, we do harm to both ourselves and our neighbor. That is Luther’s point. We cannot stop the work of creation. Luther means to say that even the devil is essentially powerless.

The relation of the human to the created world around him is characterized in the first place by the fact that the human *receives*. God gives, we receive: that is the melody which Luther is always playing, in constantly new variations. The trees and their fruits, the blossoms and their berries, the sun and the rain working together to make the earth fruitful so that we may have food

and can live—these are exhibits of God’s goodness. Sometimes the gifts are virtually thrust into our mouths without our having to do anything; sometimes we may be required to put forth a little effort, perhaps a helping hand, or two, or three. The interpretation which Luther gives to these efforts of ours is interesting. It is in this interpretation that we find the roots of Luther’s teaching concerning our vocational jobs, his doctrine of “the calling,” *Beruf*.

The work which we perform in our calling is God’s implement for propelling the gifts of nature outward so that they become available for our *fellow humans*. In a sermon from 1524, Luther describes how God gives us clothes. He gives us wool which we have to find on sheep, where it keeps growing until it is clipped: “*Dat lanam, tamen non sine labore nostra. Si pecust adest, non fit tunica*” (“He gives us wool but not without some work on our part. Just because the animal is there does not mean that clothing comes into existence”). The wool must be clipped, carded, spun, and woven. Finally, as the end product of all this human work, God’s gift arrives to the person who needs clothing.⁹

This is only one example. The farmer, the fisherman, the artisan, etc., are all in the same situation. They take into their hands something that is created, they “use” it, they make use of it in the service of their neighbor. That is the true

⁸This is the main thesis in my work on Irenaeus, *Människan och kristen*.

⁹*WA* 17/1.418 (sermon from the year 1524, recorded by Rörer).

usus of creation. In his felicitous concept of “the moment” (*Stundelein*), Luther gives clear expression to the idea that this “use” of nature is governed by the proper time. This means that it is God himself—not any of us—who is the actual subject in the action.

One cannot coerce the summer into coming, one must wait for it. The fields and the orchards are there the whole year long, “*aber wenn nicht seine Zeit kommt, so wird nichts daraus; es muss seine Zeit haben*” (“but if its time does not come, nothing will come of it; it must have its time”). Therefore it would be more correct to say that the “time” gives us the fruit, not the field, not our work—no, the “time” which the sovereign Creator gives us: “*Gott hat ein feines, freies Stundelein fur alles gesetzt, was geschehen soll*” (“God has set a precise, free moment for everything that must happen”; Weekday Sermons on John 6-8, 1530-32).¹⁰

God scatters abroad, he gives! But he has an enemy—the desire to possess, in covetousness. And covetousness, according to the New Testament, is idolatry (the worship of Mammon; Luke 12:15 ff.; Matt 6:24; Col 3:5). This is emphasized often by Luther. If the topic “responsibility for nature” had had a separate place in Luther’s theology, it would have been in connection with covetousness that he would have dealt with humanity’s destruction of nature and the “pollution of the environment.” It is of course often said in our time that the boundless exploitation of nature, and thus the destruction of nature, is the product of acquisitive desire, the product of greed. But this is seldom said by Luther. The decisive point for him is another: through our selfish desire we harm our *neighbor*.

This is an important point, and one which has consequences for ethics. But just now, as our point of departure, there is something else that must be affirmed. We must assert that it is *God*, not we or our neighbor, who is at work in the workshop which nature constitutes. The one who is at work in nature without interruption is God, and he is *creating*. The concept of nature belongs primarily to dogmatics, not to ethics. What God’s work in creation demands of us is not

first action, but *faith*. This is declared already in the Sermon on the Mount. The lilies of the field and the birds of the air instruct us, according to Jesus, about “care-free-ness” as the only completely natural attitude in life. Be not anxious for clothing or for food! God cares for you, he knows what you need.

What is it that faith does vis-à-vis nature? Faith breaks through *die Mummerei* (masquerade), or as it can also be called, *das Maskenspiel* (the masked ball). Nature (and also the community) is God’s disguise. The Creator appears disguised, hidden behind masks, one after the other. A fruit tree or rain is a disguise for God. The mother who gives her breast to her child is also a disguise, *eine Maske, eine Mumme*. All the way God is giving life, but he does it disguised. All we see are the externals, the *larvae Dei* (masks of God).

Faith breaks through this masquerade. It tears the mask from God’s face and lays hold on God himself; it grasps his true nature, which is love. Whoever does not believe sees only the external things and serves up banalities about cause and effect, the chain of causality, etc., never God. Faith sees through what God hides; faith discloses God as he is, the Giver of life behind it all—Love.

¹⁰See *WA* 33.405.

This is a great achievement. Faith is the greatest achievement which the human can reach. There are all sorts of experiences in the external flow of events which speak *against* the thesis that God is love—misfortunes, injustices, sickness and death. Therefore it is difficult, indeed it is impossible, to *hold fast* to the certainty that we are loved by the Creator and that God’s “genuine work” (*opus proprium*) is really life. When God strikes, he always strikes with his left hand in order that he might give life with his right hand. The deed of the left hand is a “foreign work” (*opus alienum*) which God must use to lead us to life—resurrection life—because of our corrupted condition.

Even Jesus got to taste this “foreign work,” in Gethsemane and at Golgotha. Since he was victorious in his encounter we can also gain confidence and faith through him. To hold fast to faith solely on the basis of what we see in nature is impossible for us humans in the long run. There is too much of God’s “wrath” in the processes of nature. We cannot believe when the image of Jesus fades away. There is in fact an entire literature within Luther research on *das rauschende Blatt*—the rustling leaf which frightens the uneasy conscience at dusk, guilt-ridden as it is and filled with anxiety in the presence of every unexpected sound in nature. Therefore one must flee to God’s genuine work in Christ. One must move away from created things to God himself and fasten the heart’s trust upon the Unseen One, upon him who is “behind the masks.”¹¹

The structure of the theological building is thus clear. We humans do not confront a nature which we can use with any kind of sovereign freedom. Rather we find ourselves in a created world which belongs to God and in which he deals with us, conferring gifts upon us but also administering discipline. The things which are in the world are to be utilized by us as tools in our work. Our work is, in principle, service to the neighbor. Only when understood in this way can our work be a genuine *usus*, an actual “use” of the gifts of creation. One might say that Luther’s inclination is to move away from nature to another theme, namely, God and the person. Phenomena that occur in nature easily lose their independent role—cease to be an independent theme—and become instead *activities of God on their way to people*. When they arrive at their

destination they have the character of *gifts*. The Creator is giving the person life through nature.

A text which we have all learned, Luther's explanation to the first article in the Small Catechism, is a good example of this theological structure. The text which is being explained contains two nouns which are obviously placed in a central position. One is "heaven," the other is "earth." The article says, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." The explanation is ten times as long as the article itself. It is an astonishing fact that in this long list of words Luther does not mention even once either the word "heaven" or the word "earth." The whole article is instead understood as dealing with *God* and the *human*. All the external events of creation and all created things are related to me and understood as gifts which I receive.

¹¹Many different utterances of Luther about God's working in disguise are collected in G. Wingren, *Luther on Vocation* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957). See the index on p. 255 under the topic "Masks of God (*larvae Dei*)."

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"I believe that God has created me and all that exists.
He has given and still preserves my body and soul with all their powers.
He provides me with food and clothing, home and family,
daily work, and all that I need from day to day.
God also protects me in time of danger
and guards me from every evil.
And this he does out of fatherly and divine goodness and
mercy, though I do not deserve it.
Therefore I surely ought to thank and praise, serve and
obey him."

Not a word about how the universe came into existence; not a word about either heaven or earth. Had this view of "creation" been maintained in Lutheranism, there would never have arisen any conflict with natural science, at least not at this point. The word about the Creator is a word about *human* existence as an existence that is *given*. Our life is a pure gift; we are not able by ourselves to bring life into existence on this clump of earth. That is a banal truth which no one in this age of ecology denies.

For Luther, human labor is also included in this gift which I have received, and which I daily receive anew. All around me are vocations, in place and functioning, giving me what I need now, as they have been doing ever since my birth. To be a mother and to take care of children is a vocation, *ein Beruf* in German. The same is true of the father, the son, the daughter. The biological birth gets merged into the social structure; all of it is *Schöpfung* (creation).¹² This is also the case with regard to the punitive function, "the sword." I am protected—"guarded," as it is written. Thanks to the authorities I am able to walk freely on the streets. The legal system is a *larva Dei*, one of God's "masks" which awaken fear—and which *should* awaken fear. That is what is intended.

It is thus clear that Luther devotes a good deal of space to specific inquiries as to just what the doctrine of creation implies. At the same time, the picture of the Creator's work is complicated by Luther's sharp distinction between "body" and "conscience," and by the associated distinction between the law and the gospel (the worldly and the spiritual regimes). In

the era of Lutheran Orthodoxy when the unity between the church and the state came to be almost total—which was not the case at the time of the Reformation—the doctrine of creation was in danger of being derailed.

Luther's doctrine of the spiritual and the worldly regimes implies that God is understood to be active in *all* human life. God does not need to use the church as an instrument in order to be in contact with the world. He is already in the world. He is there every day, without regard to whether some Christian person is also there. What God does through the word which is specifically the word of the church, the gospel, does not have as its purpose the ordering of the world.

¹²The distinction between *Schöpfungsordnungen* (orders of creation) and *Erhaltungsordnungen* (orders of preservation), which is common in Lutheranism, is not typical of Luther. God has not only been the Creator at one time; he creates *now*. "*Creare est semper novum facere*" ("to create is always to make something new," *WA* 1.563). For the later Lutheran distinction between *Schöpfung* and *Erhaltung*, see Paul Althaus, *Die christliche Wahrheit* (3rd ed.; Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1952) 307-310.

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The purpose of the gospel is to give the human a unique gift which is not given to the world.

In both "regimes" what God does is to create, and he creates *life*. The core concept in the worldly regime is that this is where God creates life for this earth, for "the earthly kingdom." Through the gospel (that is, the spiritual regime) God creates eternal life, "the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation." Thereby the gate is opened to "the heavenly kingdom." That is the basic structure of Luther's line of thought.

V. LUTHERAN AND COMMON CHRISTIAN EMPHASES

That God is at work in the world, without help from the church, is not something typical of Lutheranism only. It is a common Christian idea. It is found throughout the Bible, it is early church, it is catholic, it is Calvinistic. According to the New Testament, God feeds the lilies of the field and the birds under heaven; he does it himself, directly in nature, without our help. The situation is in fact quite the opposite: we should look at nature and learn from it how to be free of care. It is not our assignment to make nature "Christian"; it is nature that needs to teach *us* something, so that we might become better Christians, namely, that we might become more *believing, trusting*.

Not even the positive expressions in Luther about "princes" or "magistrates," the administrators of the earthly regime, are unique to the Lutheran faith. This view can also be found throughout the whole Bible. It has been alive in wide circles, without interruption, even in the times of the martyrs when the authorities persecuted the Christian congregations. What happened then was a *misuse* of the proper power of the authorities. In the same way, parents can also misuse their power over a newborn child. Such sin on the part of those who temporarily wield power does not nullify the goodness that is in *God's* deed; evil parents who conceive and give birth to a child are God's instruments for the accomplishment of something *good*—the birth of the child.¹³

Statements such as this are encountered not only in Lutheranism, and in Luther himself, but everywhere in Christianity. Even the talk about *two kingdoms* (*dua regna*) which is characteristic of Luther, and for which he is often criticized, is a widespread phenomenon, with a

solid basis in the New Testament. One important place in the Bible where it is found is the description of the meeting between Jesus and Pilate in the gospel of John (John 18:36f.). Jesus says that he is a king and has a kingdom—a *regnum*, a *basileia*: “My kingship is not of this world; if my kingship were of this world, my servants would fight, that I might not be handed over to the Jews.”

That is the way one acts in the worldly kingdom, and that is the way one ought to act. A good worldly kingdom defends its citizens with weapons. But that is not the way Jesus acts in his kingdom—the kingdom which is “not of this world.” These fundamental distinctions have entered into the theologies of all churches. They are not unique to Luther. On the other hand, what is unique to

¹³This is a position which also the *Formula of Concord* affirms, in spite of the heavily underscored theses on original sin which one encounters in that document.

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Luther is that he identifies Christ’s kingdom (the spiritual regime) with an entirely exclusive proclamation of *gospel*, “the gospel only,” while he hands over the administration of the *law* on earth to the “princes” whose task it is to rule in “the earthly kingdom.” *This* is Lutheran—and that it is Lutheran constitutes a problem for us.

The crucial point is that Luther has a different understanding of “the law” than the view usually encountered in church history. The law condemns, the law punishes (*lex semper accusans*). The thought of the law as “a friend,” a friend who guides us and spreads light along our path, which is a very common thought in the Old Testament and which plays a decisive role for example with Calvin, has no role at all in Luther. And this is where the problem lies.

The problem is made even more pointed by Luther’s sharp distinction between “body” and “conscience.” The body belongs to the earth—the earth where we work. There the person has his or her calling, and there is where a person should be doing things. The conscience is at rest in heaven. Its righteousness is a gift from Christ—“without works.” No direct line from the gospel to the body is to be found. Since the New Testament is full of stories about healing miracles, where Jesus heals the sick and thus gives the body a liberating gift, Luther’s biblical commentary and sermons are, on this point, quite peculiar to him.

A large number of gospel pericopes during the Sundays of any church year deal with miracles relating to the body—the healing of the sick, the raising of the dead. Luther consistently interprets these texts so that the physical evil is understood as guilt and the health which Jesus confers is understood as the forgiveness of sins.¹⁴ Concentration on guilt as the only evil also dominates Lutheran hymnody, especially in the 1600s. Among hymns originating in the northern countries, Grundtvig is clearly a break in this Lutheran line. He allows death to remain death—and Jesus is allowed to give health, just as it is written in the text of the gospels.

And—to complete the list of things peculiar to Lutherans—one notes the same accent on sin and forgiveness in Luther even in the interpretation of the Lord’s Supper. The Small Catechism compresses the gift of the Lord’s Supper into “the forgiveness of sins.” Other churches put other aspects in the liturgical center in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper (the offering of oneself, the sacrifice, the element of praise, etc.), but the Lutheran churches persist in their emphasis on confession and absolution—the confession of guilt and release from the burden of guilt.

Behind all of this lies the doctrine of “the two regimes”: the coercion of law in the world, and the gospel only in the church. Why did this happen? Why did Luther insist on this sharp cleavage between the two?

One must remember two things: he was an exegete and biblical interpreter, and he was the first to be successful in breaking down the power struc-

¹⁴This is very clearly shown in Gerhard Ebeling’s now classic work, *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung* (Forschungen zur Geschichte und Lehre des Protestantismus 10/1; München: Kaiser, 1942) 449-452, also 70-71. The concentration on guilt marks the Lutheran hymnody and liturgical forms consistently during the period of Orthodoxy.

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ture of Rome. Before him, Hus of Prague had been burned at the stake. Calvin came after him with structures that were quite acceptable. Luther alone had pioneered, and survived. Calvin was an organizer, and his work was never threatened in the extreme way that Luther was threatened.

Consider first then this: Luther was an interpreter of the Bible. He tore down and built up with the Bible in his hand. That he was able to break in pieces the medieval sacramental pyramid with its seven sacraments and give a new place in the congregation to baptism and the Lord’s Supper was surely something much bigger and bolder than any analysis which he made of the function of the prince in the created world. The revolution in the doctrine of the Sacrament (which Luther carried through under the constant threat of death) we have taken over without any question, but we get hung up on what he had to say about worldly government. But both positions are well anchored in Luther’s work as an interpreter of the Bible. It is, therefore, *the Bible* with which we should be disputing, rather than Luther.

So there Luther stands with his open Bible, before a church which has power over life and death, a church which includes the whole of Europe. He reads: “This cup is the new covenant in my blood...Drink ye all of it, for this is my blood, the blood of the new covenant poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” He looks around him and finds that the situation is quite the opposite: “the many,” the people, do not drink of the cup at all. It is not shared with them. It is the same with the preaching; it is not being conducted in accord with Christ’s command. To lead the church back to what Christ has commanded is Luther’s chief mission. In behalf of that cause he is prepared to die.

And this is where the big struggle takes place. On his way to Worms he is warned of what happened to John Hus. But Luther is immovable. He is determined to stand before the emperor. The growing opposition has only one effect—it makes him more and more clear about his cause. As the Swedish poet, Esaias Tegner says, Luther is “one of those enormous souls who, like trees, flower only in the storm.” But this fearless man is at the same time burdened with anxiety—not anxiety before the emperor or before people, but anxiety before *God’s* final judgment.

He finds in the Scriptures, clearly set forth and in plain words, even though distorted and squandered away by the church, precisely what he needs: *the forgiveness of sins*, constantly given anew in the Word and the Sacrament. His personal courage and his personal anxiety work together to make him immovable with respect to his separation of law and gospel: the law belongs to the world, the gospel alone is to govern in the church.

It is also clear that changes in the worldly realm, at the political level, made their contribution to this development. Around the year 1500, Europe’s power systems were at a stage

where collapse was imminent, in much the same way that Europe's colonial system was ripe for change around 1945, at the end of the second World War. The monarchies in northern Europe could not in the long run remain pawns in the hands of the papal power. What they particularly needed in the 1520s was money. The church was rich, and the monasteries were rich. This Martin Luther in Wittenberg was expounding a theology which was well-suited to the interests of the kingdoms up there in the north—a theology

which “the worldly regime” clearly needed.¹⁵ Moreover, when the new technology in the form of the printing press became available, the political course of events moved with astonishing rapidity.

Also with respect to this development, Luther stood with the Bible in his hand. He could not see anything objectionable in the fact that the princes held power in an area where the heathen authorities in the time of the New Testament had power, namely, in the world. Jesus himself says that Pilate has his power from God—and the power which is at issue is the power to crucify (John 19:10f.). Paul is equally clear and explicit that the power of the authorities is from God (Rom 13:4). On the other hand, those who are *not* to have power are the apostles and successors. On this point the New Testament and Jesus are entirely clear. But in Luther's time the pope does have worldly power. He has that power which according to Christ's words he ought not have. It is therefore biblical to allow the earthly rulers to take power away from the pope.

And this is entirely correct. That is how things are in the New Testament. Nonetheless, Luther's sharp division is still a problem, and it becomes increasingly a problem as secularization grows. The reason for this is that Luther inserts his biblically based conception of order into a political situation that did not exist in the Bible. The most important difference between the New Testament and the 1500s is that no kings, no lawmakers, no judges were Christians at the time of the apostles. The authorities were not the representatives of a specific faith—i.e., the Christian faith, and in contradistinction from some other faith. Rather, those who ruled did what they were supposed to do: they concerned themselves with “the body,” the outer person, the “earthly.” To be sure, they often did it poorly, but they did not presume to be pursuing theology.

VI. CONSEQUENCES

Before the 1500s had come to an end, the rulers in Europe became theologians as a direct consequence of the conflicts generated by the Reformation, and the stage was set for the religious wars of the 1600s. Scandinavia is Lutheran, southern Europe is Roman Catholic, England is Anglican, and Scotland is Presbyterian. Now the sector dealing with the “physical,” “the earthly kingdom,” also had come to include authority over education throughout the kingdom, the public positions taken by the kingdom, including the Christian confession which was to be adopted, the power to legislate church law in the kingdom, and much more. In this way the worldliness of the worldly regime is fundamentally revoked. The state becomes a church. This development is totally unbiblical but became a fact in practically all of Europe..

The consequences of this are particularly devastating for a Lutheran country. There the church stands and deals out the forgiveness of sins; it has nothing to do with law. The government takes care of the laws. It is the government's function to protect and safeguard all that is good; among other things it is to pro-

¹⁵The situation in Sweden is typical. Gustavus Vasa drew his conclusions regarding the economic consequences of Luther's message with unbelievable speed. The decisive meeting of the parliament at Västerås was held in 1527, only six years after the Diet of Worms, where Luther stood before the emperor at the risk of his life.

fect is the church—the “kingdom-clothed” church, with parishes which in their totality have boundaries that coincide with the physical boundaries of the kingdom. Then the worshippers gradually come to operate with the following self-evident view of the world (paradoxical though it may seem): the state performs its function well if it gives support to the Lutheran church. In return, the people are expected to learn sound values from the church.

This means that these Lutherans have ceased to understand, even in the most elementary sense, what Luther meant by the term “worldly regime.” This increasingly inability to understand what Luther has to say is due precisely to the circumstance that they are Lutherans in a land where Lutheranism is established by law. What they cannot understand and appropriate for themselves is just that which is the most important point in the Bible, in the early church, and the most important point for Luther. That is the fact that God acts *directly* in the running of the world—creating and giving life—*without* going through the church. It is *faith in the Creator* that is being gouged away.

The following statement contains a simple assertion which may seem hard to believe: one confronts a *much* clearer and more fully developed faith in creation upon reading what the church father Irenaeus says about God's work in the world, around the year A.D. 170, than one finds in a typical Scandinavian folk-churchman in, say the 1800s (Grundtvig excepted, but he derived his view from Irenaeus!).¹⁶ The Lutheran churchman intrudes the activities of the church into creation and accounts for the good in the world by reference to the influence of the gospel, which Irenaeus never does. He perceives from afar that such ideas smell of Gnosticism—and they taste of Marcion, the arch-heretic.

The situation today is such, with respect to both the outer and the inner conditions of the church and the community, that it cries out for a renewal of the doctrine of creation. The first article of the Creed must become again what it is—the *first* article and not an appendix. Luther's theology offers an abundance of texts with respect to this point which now lie unused and await a discoverer.¹⁷ Martin Luther himself is much richer in this respect than is the later state-church Lutheranism. But it remains true even about Luther that he develops his doctrine of creation with strong emphasis on law and “the worldly regime.”

This is consistent with the historical situation in which Luther stood, namely, his need to do battle with a medieval church which had great economic and political power. This situation did not exist before the year A.D. 300, and it belongs to the past all over the world. We are approaching a time that has many more similarities with the time before Constantine the Great than it does with the time of the Reformation.

¹⁶Grundtvig built directly on Irenaeus, and he did so consciously. His purpose in doing so was to liberate the Danish church from a cramped Lutheran orthodoxy. About this, see Harry Aronson, *Mänskligt och kristet. En studie i Grundtvigs teologi* (Stockholm: Svenska boksforlaget/Scandinavian University Books, 1960). The index of persons includes a large number of references to Irenaeus.

¹⁷As early as 1960, David Löfgren in his learned study, *Die Theologie der Schöpfung bei Luther* (Forschungen zur Kirchen und Dogmengeschichte 10; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), submitted a mass of new and fresh material. Since then the production of the Weimar Edition of Luther's works has proceeded

for nearly another quarter century. Today there are still more Luther texts to bring together to clarify Luther's doctrine of creation.

It was in that period before the year A.D. 300 that the first article of the Creed was established as the *first* article, the article that comes before the gospel. In this period it was Gnosticism, not the powerful Christian princes of the church, which constituted the threat to the doctrine of creation. And that is the sort of threat to faith in the Creator which we are encountering today. Gnosticism is alive all around us, within the church communions and in the common cultural life. There are difficulties involved in using Luther as a source for the renewal of creation-faith, principally because of his tendency to couple together creation and the law, the governmental authorities, etc.

It is to the *early church* that contemporary theologians should now turn. A study of the church fathers yields many positive results, and they are unproblematic results because they are not skewed in a legalistic direction. Irenaeus, who belongs to the undivided church, should become a bridge uniting Catholic and Lutheran theologians as they now strive together for a biblical understanding of creation.