

Spirituality, Evolution, Creator God

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Abstract

Evolution raises problems for some Christian beliefs, such as the character of God's creating act, whether God intervenes in nature's consistency, God's purpose in the light of nature's randomness, and whether we can refer to anything specific God does in history. This article addresses these issues first with some abstract conceptions of God, and then with considerations of the nature of God creating, the immanence and transcendence of God, and God's "action" in the world. It concludes with reflections on the Christian life in the light of this theological construction.

Keywords

God, creation, creation theology, evolution, faith and science, theology and science, evolution and spirituality

I have made the case in previous works that spirituality lies at the foundations of Christian theology and that it provides a criterion for a given theology's success. To do that I opened up the conception of spirituality so that it very nearly approached what is generally referred to as "human experience" but with important provisos. The goal of that strategic move was to relate the discipline of theology more closely to general human experience so that it did not, as spirituality and theology often do, appear as some kind of esoteric behavior that is closed to all but explicitly "religious" types.

Without trying to defend the conceptions with which I am operating, they nevertheless require working definitions. "Spirituality" refers concretely to the way people or

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groups lead their lives in the face of what they consider to be of ultimate importance. In Christian spirituality that takes the form of God as Jesus reveals or opens up the abstract notion of God to us. Although in this reckoning everyone has a spirituality who also has a coherent identity, it does not follow that all have attended to what centers their lives. "Theology" too has a meaning in this article that departs somewhat from the literal paraphrase "reflection about God." I think of theology in terms more descriptive of its sprawling character as interpreting reality through the symbols of Christian faith. Often in theologizing about the world we reinterpret the Christian symbols themselves.

With these notions in place, this article aims at illustrating how theology, developed within a framework of a spirituality responsive to an evolutionary context, will appropriate the doctrine of creation. Or, to emphasize the dialogue going on here: How does the doctrine of creation throw light on Christian spirituality in a newly appreciated evolutionary world? It assumes that people today have internalized the evolutionary character of the universe, our planet, life in it, and the emergence of the human species. Evolution should provide the framework of people's spirituality, insofar as it describes the material context in which we live. How are we to understand the doctrine of creation? What does it mean in an evolutionary world? How should we imagine the creator God since, even though we can't, we do? What is God's ongoing relation to history and to each person's personal life? How does the doctrine of creation provide a faith context that reinforces evolution and yet has a direct bearing on how Christians lead their lives in a world shared by others in the contemporary period that is so influenced by a scientific outlook?

I develop the topic in four stages. I begin by isolating four ideas that are intrinsic to or associated with evolution and have a bearing on spirituality and the theology of creation. Four aspects of an evolutionary worldview raise questions about an understanding of God, especially as creator. They concern creation as an "event," the naturalistic tightness of evolution, the blindness of the whole process, and whether, frankly, evolution challenges the existence of God. These questions set the framework of the discussion. The second part begins a constructive response by collecting some representative theological conceptions of God to help negotiate the problem of anthropomorphic language. With these formal conceptions of God as a background, I turn in part three to reflect on some standard elements of the theology of creation as a way of showing how evolution and creation are different concepts that are also intimately related. Classical creation theology goes a long way toward resolving misunderstandings. In the concluding part four I will bring these reflections to bear on Christian self-understanding and spirituality. The discussion thus concludes with a description of how the idea of God as creator may resonate with the experience of people of faith and allow them to embrace evolution. Notice that none of what is proposed here has been drawn from or has anything to do with what has been called "creationism."

Evolution and Creation

The conviction that God created all reality bumps into evolution at several points. One could say more strongly that evolution as it is described by scientists seems to call

creation into question. We have to ask how aspects of an evolutionary worldview, the vision that now comprehensively pervades an appreciation of our whole finite reality, intersect with an understanding of God, especially as creator.¹ To begin that discussion, I want to raise to the surface preconceptions, opinions, uncritical notions about emergence, evolution, and creation that cause friction between what scientists and theologians are talking about. Can we pinpoint a few questions whose answers will clarify conceptions of evolution on the one side and, more importantly, our theological conceptions on the other? Four questions will bring the subject matter of this article to a focal point.

One issue concerns the nature of the Big Bang and its theological shadow idea, creation. It is easy enough intellectually to imagine, but not picture, the Big Bang as a massive empirical event at the beginning of our universe. It would then follow for a person of faith that that event was creation. But such language misleads at several points. The so-called Big Bang represents less an event and more a scientific explanation of the origins of our universe by using knowledge drawn from physics, chemistry, and biology that sheds light on the question. The best explanations to date work within a framework positing that, from its beginning, the universe has continually expanded from an initial condition that was unimaginably dense, and continually cooled from a condition that was unimaginably hot. But the Big Bang itself should be regarded less as an event and more as “a ‘prediction’ of the model which does not represent what really occurred” but in various ways reflects it.² If the beginning of our universe is not a particular event, and theologians consistently echo this by saying that neither should we think of creation as an event at the beginning of time, we can begin the discussion with the very basic question: “What are we talking about?” That question should spark critical attention. If creation is not an event, what do theologians think it is?

A second issue arises from the consistency of the material evolution or emergence of the universe all the way to our species. Due to its continuous material development, the universe shares a constancy and uniformity from the “beginning” through time and space to our planet, emergent life within it, and the human species. Because of the continuity of the evolution of the universe through various stages plotted by astrophysics, we possess a material consistency through the galaxies to our solar system and right down to each single person. This gives the reality of the universe a steady commonality and interrelatedness; everything comes from the same material elements, atoms, and subatomic particles. It is startling to imagine that despite our tiny niche in the vastness of the cosmos, we can talk coherently about the whole of it. We are part of the universe, and we bear elements of the whole of it within ourselves.

The material consistency of the universe and the development of “new” forms of reality pinpoint a juncture that engages scientist, philosophers, and theologians. What

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1. Many biologists wish to restrict the term “evolution” to the world of living beings and, when thinking of the wider cosmogonic process, use the term “emergence.”
 2. William R. Stoeger, “The Big Bang, Quantum Cosmology and *Creatio ex Nihilo*,” in *Creation and the God of Abraham*, ed. David Burrell et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 152–75 at 158. An absolute beginning of things, even for our universe, and possibly very many others, remains somewhat murky. The evidence of science points to many universes and thus a prehistory to our universe.

is newness, and where does it come from? Was the present already back there in earlier embryonic forms? Is reflective consciousness a new form of being?

Consistency and emergence raise a question for theology: Does God interact with finite or created reality? This question is frequently dismissed by science because there is no empirical evidence for it. We need a conception of God that acknowledges the integrity bequeathed to continuous material development. The atoms and elements of the whole universe constitute our world of life. Theologians who affirm God's action in the world need a conception of it that also acknowledges and works within the natural consistency of the universe. For example, by contrast, God not only was but is creator of the universe; surely the infinite power of creating also allows God to operate whenever and however God so wills throughout the universe. But neither God nor God's action comes under human scrutiny. And God as puppeteer would take on a heavy load of direct responsibility for the suffering of the world. The question is whether, how, and where God intervenes into the story of nature's evolution right up to ourselves.

The issue is not quite the same as imagining a "closed" as distinct from an "open" system of natural phenomena. The question is as large as the universe and may be thought of in metaphysical terms. On the one hand, science provides micro-data from quantum theory and macro-data from chaos theory that can tolerate a metaphysical conception of the universe as open to uncharted forces. On the other hand, science explains things by the interactions of data and patterns of behavior without appeal to interventions from God. In so doing science lays out a challenge for theologians: if theology affirms God's action being involved in the same phenomena, it has to have some plausible conception of how this works. This issue pervades the dialogue between science and theology, where both sides tend to back away from God's intermittent intervention into the flow of nature and life.³

This question of the consistency of the universe and systems within it carries profound meaning for the theological imagination.⁴ The question of how God acts in the world transcends an apology for the miracles of Jesus recorded in the New Testament. More fundamentally, what can the phrase, "an intervention of God in history," mean today in a discussion of Christian faith in our scientifically constructed world? More particularly what does this say about prayer of petition to the Creator God? If prayer does not accommodate asking God to intervene in the processes of nature or the flow of human events, how should we understand what is going on in classic forms of petition? Suddenly we are confronted with a question about an overtly metaphysical theological issue that has direct pertinence to ordinary daily religious spirituality.

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3. There are sophisticated exceptions to this tendency. In fact, scientists and theologians use a variety of formulas or models to envision a response to this question. I am not proposing a "closed" universe in which science reveals no openness to the possibility of "transcendent" presence. The question is rather one of coherently and plausibly accounting for it. I will not enter here into the discussion of models of God interacting with the world or try to arbitrate the discussion between them, but will find a resolution in creation theology itself.
 4. This works both ways. Much of the resistance to spirituality of a religious kind is based on an unreformed childlike imagination of God and God's work in the world.

A third problem for the doctrine of creation accompanies the recognition that evolution is a blind process described in micro-detail by Darwin as natural selection.⁵ That conclusion confronts head-on a naïve notion of God's providence which is a corollary of creation. It may be helpful to state the opposition between these ideas in order to set the question clearly. It can be entertained at different levels of consciousness.

On the one hand, creation, the direct action of God holding things in being, is a continual process, *creatio continua*, so that it can be seen to entail providence, God's "seeing" and guiding creation through time. This injects direction and purpose into the process. On the other hand, Darwin explained in straightforward terms the mechanics of a blind process of natural selection that operated randomly by tiny changes over long periods of time. A new species may arise over a vast amount of time by a hit-and-miss series of possibility, opportunity, and event. If each moment of the series that generates change is blind, it is hard, but not impossible, to assign sight to the whole process. Looking backwards one can read the successive events that led to the present in a coherent way, but the process from the past toward the future shows every present to be a random product. The underlying structure of an evolutionary universe and our world of living species, then, involves openness, indeterminacy, and lack of a specific purpose and endgame.⁶ This account has been verified.

What are evolution's implications for understanding God's providence and governance which are corollaries of God's creating? This discussion will address these questions that have a bearing on the two distinct levels seen in the previous question of divine intervention. On the broad metaphysical level, Christian language exudes a sense that all reality participates in a teleological direction that spontaneously tends to draw evolution into itself. But the deep underpinnings of purpose are challenged here. And the same is true on the personal level of an individual's life. Sudden wild attacks of randomness, like the death of a child, cut deeply into the basic orientation of people's lives. These considerations show that theology will not draw back the veil of mystery covering this subject matter. But it still has work to do.

Finally, we are led to the question of the very need for God raised by evolution. Based on appearances, some conclude from evolution that the existence of God is not necessary: not for the being of the universe, because it can be simply presupposed as being there.⁷

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5. I am calling emergence and biological evolution "blind" in contrast to God's providential "seeing" and simple ideas of teleology. While thoroughgoing naturalists will concur with this "blindness," others can read some form of "sight" in the patterned behavior of laws and the empirical evidence of a direction in natural selection toward complexity and higher forms of life. While "direction" falls short of specific "purpose," it does seem to transcend pure randomness and provide something like "sight." But we will have to get beyond these blunt metaphors.
 6. There is more to be said here, but this sets up the problem and helps to explain why evolution has been seen as deeply subversive of a religious imagination.
 7. "There may be no ultimate answer to the 'Why?' question. The universe simply is, in this particular way, and that's a brute fact. Once we figure out how the universe behaves at its most comprehensive level, there will not be any deeper layers left to discover." Sean Carroll, *The Big Picture: On the Origins of Life, Meaning, and the Universe Itself* (New York: Dutton, 2016), 203.

Not for the order of the universe, because evolution explains it: order is what evolution produced. And not for grounding ethics, because ethics can be based on reason in dialogue with the order in place. These are not scientific conclusions, but some scientists maintain these as objects of faith. The question of the existence of God cannot be resolved on the basis of empirical evidence.⁸

I do not argue here for the existence of God; instead, this article addresses Christians who already believe in God. But evolution leaves these essential questions addressed to the theology of creation: “What is God?” and “What does God do?” These questions must be given attention if we want to live in a culture influenced by the vast and differentiated world of science. The first question, “What is God?”⁹ is not intended to undermine the personality of God. Instead, it urges the use of an imagination that rises above the anthropomorphism of ordinary religious language and appropriates a language as critical as the one used by scientists to understand material exchanges of nature. The second question, “What does God do?” finds its first and most direct response in the theology of creation.

These focusing questions place demands on both the scientist as such and the believing Christian. For a scientist with a consciousness attuned to appreciate empirical evidence, these questions remain as crucial as they are difficult. What are we talking about? Is God a big person in the sky? Theology will never be able to present direct empirical evidence for God. For the believing Christian, because these questions draw out conceptions oriented to a culture deeply influenced by science, they may also disturb naïve faith. But Christians should at least be able to talk plausibly about how God’s action relates to the workings of the physical world. And churches should be nurturing that possibility.

Theological Conceptions of God

Evolution raises some questions about God and creation. The question posed by John Haught—What is God?—startles by its neuter gender. It grabs one’s attention. It calls for an explanation of the abstract definitions of God that follow.

Addressing the critical questions that are raised by science cannot rely exclusively on spontaneous commonsensical religious language. Its anthropomorphic character does not meet the critical imagination that scientific reasoning brings to the discussion. Of course, all language about transcendent reality relies on metaphor and symbol because human knowing is tied by the imagination to the concrete world of sensible perception. But through second reflection, which objectifies our own language and interrogates its meaning, we can set up an abstract language containing an intrinsic dynamic tension acknowledged by the person using it. For example, we believe that God is personal, but God is not a big person in the sky. On the one hand, the words we

8. For example, Robert Wright believes that science cannot dispel “deep mystery and all evidence of purpose,” but neither does this directionality demand the existence of God. Robert Wright, *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny* (New York: Vintage, 2000), 318–34 at 331.

9. John F. Haught, *What Is God? How to Think about the Divine* (New York: Paulist, 1986).

use to refer to God are drawn from some kind of this-worldly experience; on the other hand, God as God cannot be reduced to anything finite. This language, then, is “dialectical” in this sense: it both refers an imaginative predicate to God as God is encountered in faith, and simultaneously it knows that God utterly and absolutely transcends the meaning assigned. Within faith, this is not doubletalk. Critical abstract language does not portray God as God is and yet opens an existential engagement that is both transcendentally real and aware of its inadequacy.¹⁰

It should also be noted at the beginning of this discussion that the notions of God presented at this point prescind from explicit reference to Jesus of Nazareth who is the central mediation of Christian faith in God. Christian faith in God is “christomorphic”; it takes a form derived from the ministry of Jesus.¹¹

God is Pure Act of Being

In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas proposed one of the classic definitions of what God is: “God is being itself, of itself subsistent,” or, more simply, “God is subsisting being itself.”¹² This seemingly simple definition of God contains comprehensive meaning that borders on the mystical. Some of his allied formulas will help explain it.

The term “being” begins to open up the depth of Aquinas’s formula. “Being” is the substantive form of the verb “to be” or “is.” As a gerund, a verb functioning as a noun, it refers to activity. From one perspective, the idea of the activity of being is abstract: one has to pierce the character of what is and focus on its existing. This is clarified by its opposite: nonbeing or nothingness. Meditation on the very “being” of things can yield a deep sense of wonder and awe, and lead to the question of being: Why is there anything at all? That question has been objectified and trivialized; for one who meditates, it can be life-changing.

Aquinas deepens the “Being” that linguistically “defines” God by contrast with all finite beings in existence. All of them are particular; they have a finite nature that enjoys the activity of being in a certain way; they possess the action of being for a time, and then they cease to exist. All beings have a “being” that is limited by the kind of being it is and the individuality that instantiates it. By contrast, the essence or nature or kind of being that is God is itself the pure action of being and is not limited. God is subsistent being, being without any limitation and thus infinite.¹³

10. There are a variety of ways to make this point; it is a relative commonplace in the discussion of faith knowledge as a basis for theology, and it can be formulated in different ways. Here are two: Thomas Aquinas says that every quality that is predicated of God has simultaneously to be denied as applying to God in the form experience gives it because of God’s infinity. The dialectic is the tension between affirmation and denial (see Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1, q. 13, a. 3, ad 2). Another way of proposing the dialectical character of affirmations about God is in holding together two qualities that ordinarily would be opposed. For example, Christians say that God is infinitely just and merciful.

11. The conceptions of God that follow would be substantially enhanced by a consideration of Jesus Christ. But that is a topic for another article.

12. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 4, a. 2.

13. Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 3, aa. 3–4.

Another dimension of Aquinas's conception of God pushes beyond "infinite being" and penetrates more deeply into the character of God. Aristotle's foundational conception of things, which Aquinas appropriated, viewed them as a composite of an active meaning-giving form and a receptive stuff or potentiality that was shaped into an individual thing. In this language of act and potency, the term "act," in a variety of different contexts and uses, communicated action, energy, power, dynamism, and generativity. In all finite beings, this power is limited by the kind and individuality of the being it animates. In God, it is not limited. In fact, God's very nature and essence are actively "to be." This means that God is pure, absolutely undiluted, and unmitigated act of being. Such pure action of being is, of course, unimaginable, and this makes it a good definition of God. God "subsists" as pure infinite power of being of all that is. God is the pure act of being itself. The mystical dimension of this symbol appears in Meister Eckhart who studied Aquinas.¹⁴

God is the Ground of Being

This conception of God is associated with Paul Tillich who used it with great effectiveness. It shares characteristics with Thomas Aquinas and, more pointedly, with Meister Eckhart's mystical appropriation of a Thomistic ontology of God. Tillich noticed how for Eckhart God was Being itself and divinity was the ground of all being.¹⁵ Tillich's existential theology, where subject and the known object infiltrate each other, aligns his language more closely with Eckhart than with Aquinas. The meaning of "ground of being" manifests itself as revelation. It refers not to a substance, or a cause, but to the absolute mystery of being that is simultaneously "abyss" and source of meaning and dynamic principle of energy. "The religious word for what is called the ground of being is God."¹⁶

Another dimension of Tillich's conception of God as ground of being appears in his description of the structure of its manifestation and how it is encountered. This he calls "ecstatic reason." Human reason possesses an extraordinary ability to transcend the constraints of an ordinary situation; in an experience of transcendence "the mind is grasped by mystery, namely, by the ground of being and meaning."¹⁷ The pervasive character of "Being itself" and "ground of being" means that the power of being may reveal itself in implicit or latent forms of consciousness. For example, in his meditation on elemental courage, Tillich finds the ground of being to be the ontological power it takes to face life

14. Eckhart should be read in the philosophical framework of Albert the great and Thomas Aquinas where God is conceived as the infinite act of pure being causing the "to be" of creatures. This elicits a panentheistic vision in which all reality subsists within the sphere of God's power and makes God a divine presence saturating all that is. See Bernard McGinn, "Meister Eckhart: Mystical Teacher and Preacher," in *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism*, vol. 4, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany (1300–1500)* (New York: Crossroad, 2005), 107–17.

15. Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought: From Its Judaic and Hellenistic Origins to Existentialism*, ed. by Carl E. Braaten (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 201–2.

16. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 1:156.

17. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:112.

itself. “Every act of courage is a manifestation of the ground of being, however questionable the content of the act may be.”¹⁸ This opens up the range of experiencing the absolute mystery of God to everyone and as a possibility in any phase of life.

Finally, it has to be emphasized that conceiving God as “ground” of being proposes a transcendence of God that simultaneously recognizes the immanence of God to all things; all things are rooted in God’s power of being that sustains things from within. This is possible because God is not a substance or *a* being; God is the ground of all things or beings. But neither is God limited by things, for God is absolutely transcendent: Being itself is “above” all gods or conceptions of God.¹⁹ We have to speak of God as if God were a definite being, but always with the awareness of the complete distortion that objectifying language imposes on God. “The God who is *a* being is transcended by the God who is Being itself, the ground and abyss of every being.”²⁰

God is Serendipitous Creativity

Gordon Kaufmann, a twentieth- and twenty-first-century theologian at Harvard University, left us this conception of God which he explicitly constructed from a dialogue with evolution. The connection with creation is explicit. The idea agrees with the two previous conceptions that God is not *a* being but transcendent dynamic mystery.

Kaufmann derives his notion of creativity from two sources of experience. The one is human creativity, something that we can experience within ourselves as an ability to create, to imagine new things and to effect them. But the stronger and prime analogate for creativity connects with the experience of the world of development and evolution. Creativity is “the idea of the coming into being through time of the previously nonexistent, the new, the novel” that we have come to witness all around us.²¹ “There is a serendipitous feature in all creativity: more happens than one would have expected, given previously prevailing circumstances, indeed, more than might have seemed possible.”²² In this definition, the dynamism of evolution through chance variation and selective adaptation is inserted into the conception of God. Kaufmann moves beyond thinking of God as a cause of reality to make God the dynamic energy itself of reality. “Creativity *happens*: this is an absolutely amazing mystery.”²³ Kaufmann is not moving from God to an

18. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 181.

19. See John J. Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine: God, Creation, and the Human Predicament: An East–West Conversation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 136–43. One can see at this point how closely these conceptions of God are aligned with the doctrine of creation. Much more will be said about the implications of these conceptual designations of God.

20. Paul Tillich, *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), 82.

21. Gordon D. Kaufman, *In the Beginning ... Creativity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 55.

22. Kaufman, *In the Beginning*, 56.

23. Kaufman, *In the Beginning*, 56. “Precisely because of this close connection with the idea of mystery, ‘creativity’ is a good metaphor for thinking about God. If used properly, it preserves the notion of God as the ultimate mystery of things, a mystery that we have not been able to penetrate or dissolve—and likely never will succeed in penetrating or dissolving” (56).

idea of Creator God; he is moving from an idea of creativity and trying it out as a metaphor for God. One cannot presume to know God and then move logically from there.

As in the two previous definitions of God, the abstract character of “God as serendipitous creativity” shifts the language of piety from spontaneous, specific, and affective to a vaguer, reflective and cerebral idiom. By removing the anthropomorphic and anthropocentric dimensions of a commonsensical perspective, the concept forces looser, and yet more austere and abstract language fitted to the absolute and all-pervasive mystery of God. But one can speak of God’s love for human beings and God’s creative impulse toward human flourishing.²⁴

In sum, this definition of what God is has the advantage of drawing into itself the awesome conceptions of reality that science has most recently provided our imaginations, the statistical notions that blow open our imaginations and leave our minds gaping. And behind all the groping for adequate images for the age, size, energy, and intricate dynamism of reality, we may be able to accept a mystery that goes by the name of “serendipitous creativity.”

God is Incomprehensible Mystery

The word “God” for Karl Rahner points to incomprehensible mystery. Sometimes he says “Holy Mystery.” John Haught believes that “the idea of mystery [is] the most appropriate designation for the divine.”²⁵ With it we begin to get the sense that all of these definitions are really the same—each one confesses this substantive character of God. But three qualities help draw out distinctive notes in Rahner’s usage: his approach to mystery, the ontology of it, and its pervasive character.

Rahner embraces a partly Thomistic, partly Kantian, and partly existentialist analytical approach to God that deftly combines the human knower and what it can know. He looks on human knowledge as being-that-is-present-to-itself. To know ourselves is to know something about being itself. The clarity of self-consciousness, the ability to know the self even as the self entertains contact with the world outside the self, represents the distinctiveness of human knowledge. He also holds that human knowledge can be in conscious contact with infinite reality, but only obliquely, through the sense that the whole of the reality we know is finite and limited. The idea of mystery is connected with this glimpse of infinite transcendence through the sense of finitude. In this negative or “dialectical” way, human beings are able to perceive reality against the horizon of an infinity that is as real as it is mysterious. This objectivity can be experienced, at least indirectly, so that “incomprehensible mystery” also implies a being engaged by Holy Mystery. The very word “God” cannot be neutral: it points to something that draws people in and makes a claim on a person, which each one has either to accept or reject. This theme will recur.

This existential description of an encounter with incomprehensible mystery can be characterized in objective terms. However mysterious these terms remain, they carry

24. Kaufman, *In the Beginning*, 66–68.

25. Haught, *What Is God*, 116.

an experiential residue. The classical language of “participation” gets at this side of the experience of absolute mystery. Rahner expresses this again in dialectical terms: radical closeness to God bestows genuine autonomy. “The radical dependence and genuine reality of the existent coming from God vary in direct and not in inverse proportion.”²⁶ This means that the closer to God, and the more actually dependent, the more autonomous in being: “genuine reality and radical dependence are simply just two sides of one and the same reality.”²⁷

Finally, “incomprehensible mystery” carries a pervasive and comprehensive character that can accompany human existence in life across time. The metaphor of a “horizon” helps to describe this. God’s relation to the world is not as a being relating to other beings, but as the grounding power of being: “The infinite expanse which can and does encompass everything cannot itself be encompassed.”²⁸ This presence of God to the world as ground describes a permanent horizon of existence and not merely a subjective experience. And the consciousness of it can run deep.

God is Transcendent Presence

I draw this definition of God from contemporary theologian Thomas O’Meara’s metaphysics of revelation.²⁹ In many ways this definition absorbs the others into itself. It does not compete with the other conceptions but provides a distinctive focal image that reflects human experience. The fuller range of its effectiveness will become manifest throughout the development of this discussion. What follows are comments on the meaning of Presence and some of the merits of its usage.

God as Presence reflects a modern idea of faith knowledge where the meaning of the term resonates with experience and, on the basis of analysis, also refers to objectivity. It holds together an experience of transcendent Presence to consciousness and the realist conviction that it refers to something other than the self. A real transcendent Presence makes itself known within human experience. It appeals to a common experience of believers in God that some mysterious Presence works within and is irreducible to anything that is caused either by themselves or their environment. Many people have experiences of transcendence; such experience seems common enough to consider it a universal possibility.³⁰ But it takes myriad different forms because of its

26. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 79.

27. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 79.

28. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 63.

29. Thomas Franklin O’Meara, “Towards a Subjective Theology of Revelation,” *Theological Studies* 36 (1975): 401–27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056397503600301>.

30. The experience and acceptance of transcendent Presence is usually understood in personalist terms of faith. But Edward Schillebeeckx construes such faith arising out of a social political experience of life that requires some form of utopia. He roots the experience of transcendent Presence as the object of hope’s demand for a coherent seriousness of reality that responds to the suffering and injustice that affect all. See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Seabury, 1980), 740–41.

contextual mediation. Recognition of a required mediation of transcendent Presence explains religious pluralism. In itself the nature of the transcendent reality that is Present remains open in this formula. But unlike the others it connotes or suggests a personal presence. "Presence" more explicitly implies that the "ground of being" is also the ground of personhood. Following Tillich, then, the "ultimate concern of a person cannot be less than a person."³¹ Presence implies "personal Presence." But this should not lapse into the anthropomorphism that God is a person.

This definition of God has several qualities that recommend it. It is a deliberately vague and diffuse concept that says something but in a way that can be construed differently. The metaphor of God's Presence offers a way of talking about the many aspects and dimensions of the fundamental interaction between God and human existence in a single inclusive metaphor and symbol. It expresses a foundational contact between God and human beings that holds together and releases many different experiences and conceptions of how God is active within history as a function of different contexts and mediations.

In an evolutionary framework, where reality moves through continuous time, God's transcendent Presence within the process smooths out long-term antitheses into compatible polarities of coexisting aspects of reality. These antitheses are either overcome or can be held together: God-world; God-human beings without competition; grace-nature; grace-free will; theology-science; church-world; Christian life-worldly life. In every case Presence, though experienced, remains transcendent; it does not operate as a part of the finite world to which it is present.

A third quality recommends this definition of God: it can be appreciated in the context of popular religion and by those who are theologically critical. The appeal of the metaphor is direct: God-as-transcendent-Presence spans the immediate and spontaneous character of ordinary experience and language about God and the critical dimension of faith that it be a concern about the ultimate. It makes a direct appeal to a common experience of believers in God as an irreducible mysterious Presence. When John Wesley asked how he knew he was united with God, he said he knew by the same process by which he knew he was alive.³²

These five conceptions of God do not give us all we need in order to appropriate in a positive constructive way all that evolution is telling us about God and ourselves. But they give us a start. One does not have to remember the nuances of these conceptions to appreciate what follows. But it is essential to recognize that science teaches us that we cannot think about God in baby language when addressing the world that has been described with the measured language of science. Much more can be said about God by consulting the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth which is concrete in contrast to these abstract conceptions. But a reflective theological conception of God is absolutely necessary for an intelligent dialogue between theology and evolution. Many of the so-called problems that arise for faith in the face of science stem from some kind

31. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 1:156.

32. John Wesley, "The Witness of the Spirit," in *The Works of the Rev. John Wesley* (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1826-27), 5:92-101 at 94.

of anthropomorphism, either on the side of faith or on the side of, not science, but scientists who know less about faith and theology than I do about science. I now pass to some basic reflections from the theology of creation that integrate these conceptions of God with reflections on the language of creation that engages evolution and the problems it creates.

Reflections on Creation

Since Darwin published his *Origins* in 1859 right up into our own day, evolution has threatened Christian faith. The age and size of the universe seem to dwarf the human and dethrone anthropocentrism; the tight consistency of nature seems to edge out God's intervention in the world and our lives; the randomness of evolution, indeed, of history itself, seems to subvert confidence in divine purpose; scientists do not speak of God and do not seem to need the divine. As in an article in Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, these problems raise questions that require answers.

The first part of an answer lies in more considered conceptions of God, and the five proffered concepts raise the level of the dialogue with evolution to a critical level. Now we turn to classical theological conceptions of creation which remain surprisingly relevant in a conversation with twenty-first-century science. Because there is no room here for a comprehensive theology of creation, the discussion is limited to distinctions that seem relevant to the issues at hand. I raise up three salient theological understandings of creation: the first is that the essence of creation consists of an ontological relationship that is not perceptible but that can be experienced in a rudimentary way. The second is that the transcendence and immanence of God relative to the world are simply perspectives on God's single Presence: they include each other. The third proposes that God's "action" in the world does not compete with natural forces, especially not human freedom, but subsists within them as an entirely constructive impulse toward a positive future. Together these three convictions provide a space that allows evolution to open up a new understanding of God.

Creation Means the Absolute Dependence of Reality on God

A reflection on creation might well begin with an elementary consideration of the meaning of the word. Creation refers to what God does. Since God and no other creates, the primary meaning of the term is "subjective" in the sense that it refers to God acting. In a secondary sense, creation refers to the effect of God creating. God's creation means our whole universe and perhaps others including everything in them. The whole finite world is the creation of God. Usually the distinct usage is clear from the context, but in some instances both aspects of creation may be in play at the same time as in the proposition that creation is a mystery.

It may be important to note that we know more about objective creation than subjective creation. We live in and are part of the objective creation of God, and we learn something more about this mystery every day. But the creating act of God is unimaginable and impenetrable mystery. God's action shares in the definition of God as

incomprehensible mystery. We talk about God creating, but we literally know nothing about it in any positive sense.³³

In fact, our speaking about God creating often misleads. For example, we say that “in the beginning God created heaven and earth,” which leaves the impression that God’s act of creation transpired at the beginning of time. Was it not the beginning of time? But that would place God’s action of creating within and subject to time, a point in time, whereas God’s creating constitutes the ongoing condition of the possibility of existence.³⁴ Creation is not about temporal origin but an ontological statement about the ultimate dependence of all reality on a metaphysical creator. “It is not about a creation event, but about a *relationship* which everything that exists has with the creator.”³⁵ The classical idea of an ongoing creation by God (*creatio continua*), referring to creation from the perspective of time, implies that this relationship to God is a permanent structural condition of all that is. Finite existence is because of a constant participation in the power or ground of being.

Yet one can find a place in nature that bears witness to creation, that is, within human self-consciousness. Drawing on principles that are relevant to this reflection, we can stipulate that human existence is a part of nature and not in a neutral place above it looking out on it. Also, because human consciousness is nature that is conscious of itself, deep structures within human consciousness can reveal something about nature. On those assumptions, the phenomenology of the human subject offered by Friedrich Schleiermacher seems archetypal: the depth of human existence is an open space of freedom and agency in the world; yet relative to its own existence the human spirit knows only passivity and dependence. We have no power over our being or not being but depend absolutely on a power of being that we do not control.³⁶ This is not proof of creation any more than Aquinas’s argument for the existence of God from efficient causality is a proof. But it connects creation to human experience.

To conclude this fundamental consideration of the meaning of the term “creation,” we cannot move forward without underlining the sphere of understanding to which this language appeals and how it is not defined by empirical reference. Evolution convinces us that our universe and we ourselves occur in time; existence consists of a story. We can, therefore, look backward toward origins and forward toward where it is heading. But that temporal story does not and cannot reveal its created character; creation is not an empirical structure. So, for example, one can meditate on and marvel at the anthropic principle, but to think it is an argument for creation misinterprets what

33. Thomas Aquinas was clear on this: We can know *that* God exists; we cannot know *what* God is; at best, we can also know what God is not. *ST* 1, q. 3, intro; 1, q. 12, aa. 12–13.

34. Thus, by contrast to God’s act being a temporal act, Robert Neville speaks of God’s single act of creation as encompassing all of time in the singleness of God’s not-temporality. See Robert Cummings Neville, *Philosophical Theology*, vol. 1, *Ultimates* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 230.

35. Stoeger, “The Big Bang,” 172.

36. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), para. 4 (pp. 12–18). This phenomenology slides seamlessly into Schleiermacher’s theology of creation: paras. 40–41 (pp. 149–56).

creation is: an intrinsic and invisible relationship with the ground of being that is intimated in the question of why there is being at all.

Creation Entails the Immanence and Transcendence of God

A second defining feature of the doctrine of creation is that God creates out of nothing: *creatio ex nihilo*. This, too, is unimaginable because empirical data only bear witness to existing reality generating reality in new forms. This raises the question of how this doctrine arose, as it is not present in the Bible in any clear or undisputed form. Even when the original text is well translated by the English “creation,” it remains uncertain that the idea of “from nothing” in the ordinary sense of “nothing at all” is intended.³⁷ Because it is unimaginable, the concept of “nothing” involves a sophisticated logic. We need to ask about the source of “out of nothing” and why it is important.

Whether or not it can be found in the Scriptures, the idea of creation out of nothing became important in the second century. Christianity was in full dialogue with Greek culture at this point, and the issue of the universal sway of the Jewish God was in play. Creation out of nothing reinforced monotheism in a polytheist context. “Only by recognizing the creation to have been *ex nihilo* is the supremacy of the Divine will to be given full expression, and thus can justice be done to the testimony of the Scriptures.”³⁸ Creation out of nothing gave the Christian God absolute sovereignty over all things and along the way made matter, the primal stuff, good, because it, too, was created by God. This early insistence on the goodness of matter has relevance today where theology tends to emphasize the value of spirit and science the solid validity of materiality. If the main polarity of creation finds focus in being and nonbeing, and it is resolved by the intrinsic unity of creator and created, the hostility between spirit and matter may be laid to rest.³⁹ The decisive issue, then, resides in the relation between God and creatures.

The phrase “creation out of nothing” implies the possibility of saying “there is nothing between God and creation.” This way of speaking highlights the entailment that God is directly present to what God creates. No pre-existent material or medium

37. For example, the text of 2 Maccabees 7:28 seems explicitly to paraphrase “out of nothing” in this way: “I beseech you to recognize that God did not make [heaven and earth] out of things that existed.” But ambiguity arises in two places: first, the terms chaos, formlessness, the void, or the deep in Gen 1:1–2 in one sense point to “something” and in another sense refer to “nothing,” because what they indicate is unformed or not specified. Second, it is difficult to know the meaning intended, and this can only be sorted out intra-textually or culturally and with ambiguity. Ernan McMullin, “Creation *ex Nihilo*: Early History,” in Burrell, *Creation and the God of Abraham*, 11–23 at 13–16.

38. McMullin, “Creation *ex Nihilo*,” 20. One could argue that the nuanced form of the doctrine is implicitly contained in Scripture, and that it took explicit form within the new context and its problems.

39. The dynamic unity of spirit and matter “has rich potential for a meeting with modern science, where it is increasingly evident that matter, as congested energy, is just as much a mystery as anything we might call spirit or soul.” Janet M. Soskice, “*Creatio ex nihilo*: Its Jewish and Christian Foundations,” in Burrell, *Creation and the God of Abraham*, 24–39 at 39.

channels God's creating finite existence. The context for conceiving this stipulates that God is continually creating (from our perspective in time), and that creation is not an act in or of the past but is ever actual. This in turn involves God's constant Presence within the depths of all reality. This conception has always been taught with the "omnis" that follow from creation: God is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient. But these qualities of God frequently succumb to an objective anthropomorphic image of God as a supreme being over against finite beings.

By contrast, the five conceptions of God characterized earlier more easily allow God's immediate and direct presence to finite reality as a whole and to every entity within it. They alter the framework in which the classical qualities of God are understood. All things are intrinsically constituted by and exist within the creating power that is God. The frequently used theological term to describe this is "pantheism" which etymologically signals that all things exist within the power of God so that God is the "within" of all that exists. We will need to say more about how God relates to the world in order to resolve the paradox this sets up and that Langdon Gilkey describes this way: "the world is totally and essentially dependent on God (*non ex materia*), and yet the world is not identical with God (*non de Deo*)."⁴⁰ How can we talk about "absolute dependence" and ability to be "over-against" at the same time?

A purely theological consideration of the transcendence and immanence of God offers an entrée into a first understanding of the relation between God and the world. Theology sometimes represents God's transcendence with language depicting God as "totally other" or "absolutely different" than created reality. But frequently this language rests on a tacit supposition that God is *a* being, with a determinate nature, so that, when the language is taken at face value, it creates an unbridgeable gap or difference between God and creatures. It is true that such language works rhetorically. But on a deeper level it really sets up a dualism or disconnection between God and creatures that attenuates or cancel's God's immanence.

The five conceptions of God offered here, God as act, ground, creativity, mystery, and Presence, revise the simultaneity of the transcendence and immanence of God by recognizing that God is not *a* being that is infinite, but, like a verb, God is "act" or "energy" or "dynamism." Once we construe God as not *a* being, and not related externally to finite beings as another object, transcendence and immanence can begin to coalesce into a unified or non-dual reciprocity.⁴¹ God can be said to be "over-against" relative to the world in many ways, especially with regard to some human dispositions, actions, and their effects. But on the metaphysical level of creation, it makes little sense to conceive as totally other the very act and ground of finite being. We need a finer-grained language than transcendence and immanence.

40. Langdon Gilkey, "Creation, Being, and Nonbeing," in *God and Creation: An Ecumenical Symposium*, ed. David B. Burrell and Bernard McGinn (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 226–41 at 229.

41. Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine*, 137, states this clearly in the case of Paul Tillich. But, *mutatis mutandis*, the principle also reflects the thought of Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhart, Nicolas of Cusa, Karl Rahner, Gordon Kaufmann, and Robert Neville who are resources for this reflection.

Before going there, however, it might be helpful simply to note how this conversation engages the imagination as, for example, in the case of the gender of God. On the one hand, the formal but dynamic “definitions of God” offered earlier transcend considerations of gender. On the other hand, all words, concepts, and more generally language carry an implicit imaginative referent, so that gender may be operative at some level of appreciation, not to mention social construction. God both transcends gender and invites descriptive language that is appropriate in context. The use of gendered language, like all the predicates we apply to God, becomes subject to what Thomas Aquinas called the simultaneous affirmation and negation of whatever we say of God.⁴²

The Relationship between God and the World

This third cluster of ideas from creation theology digs more deeply into the entailment of creation out of nothing and places in clear relief a crucial distinction between what Thomas Aquinas called first (or primary) causality and secondary causality. The distinction helps define a framework that enables a language for addressing God’s relation to the world as understood by science.⁴³

The key terms here are drawn from a distinction between God’s action of creating that Aquinas calls “primary causality” and the “secondary causality” witnessed within the finite or created world.⁴⁴ Primary causality refers to how God acts, to what God does as creator. By contrast, what happens in the finite world, all the processes of the universe, including what we do, are called secondary causality. The point is that the two forms of action are different, with a difference that requires that they coexist. God creates and, as immanent Presence, supports reality against nonexistence. By contrast, the world that God sustains by creating consists of a dynamic network of causes interacting with each other.⁴⁵

42. “Such names as these, as Dionysius shows, are denied of God for the reason that what the name signifies does not belong to Him in the ordinary sense of its signification, but in a more eminent way.” Aquinas, *ST* 1, q. 13, a. 3, ad 2.

43. Christian theology asks how one might conceive God’s “special” action in history as distinct from God’s universal presence and action: can God intervene and act as a cause within the framework of history? William Stoeger sets the question in “Conceiving Divine Action in a Dynamic Universe,” in *Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action: Twenty Years of Challenge and Progress*, ed. Robert John Russell, Nancy Murphey, and William R. Stoeger (Berkeley: Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences; Vatican City: Vatican Observatory, 2008), 225–47 at 225–27.

44. Elizabeth Johnson notes that “the best way to understand God’s action in the indeterminacy of the natural world is by analogy with how divine initiative relates to human freedom.” Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Does God Play Dice? Divine Providence and Chance,” *Theological Studies* 57 (1996): 3–18 at 16, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056399605700101>. There is wisdom in recognizing conscious experience as a part of nature. But one can think in both directions. I will appeal to an example of Aquinas’s analysis of causality in nature that also describes the coincidence of freedom and grace.

45. Stoeger notes how the idea of creation out of nothing puts a finer point on the nature of God as transcendent pure act, and not *a* being, as a way of resolving how God acts in history. That means “*creatio ex nihilo* and the ideas closely connected with it ... provide a fundamental

The distinction seems clear, except for the fact that God creating remains absolute mystery. But first causality, understood formally as “what God does,” plainly differs from and is defined by contrast with what creatures do. God is not and cannot be a secondary cause because God is not a creature. Nor can any created object be a primary cause because that is what God does. Wherever anything exists, God is present as creator but not as secondary cause, not as an agent of this world, not as the performer of any finite action, but as the sustainer of the agent itself.⁴⁶ The creative sustaining power of God suffuses reality and is present in every worldly activity, including what goes on in black holes and in the buzzing motion of subatomic particles within the relatively huge space of an atom, even in evil actions. But not as a secondary cause.⁴⁷

The distinction between first (creative) and second (finite) causes sets up a theological framework for understanding how God acts in the world and in history. There are several facets to this large conception of things. Of major importance is the principle that God does not intervene in the world, in the process of evolution, or in historical events. One should not think of, let alone expect, an intervention of God in this world. The reason for this is not that the world is a “closed” system, but that God is already present to finite reality and has no other “place” from which to intervene. Nor does God disrupt the laws of nature that God sustains or interrupt history that unfolds through a web of natural processes. Both ideas imply secondary causality. But God is the always already active creative Presence in everything that transpires as its primary cause. God cannot be God and a secondary cause at the same time any more than God can be creator and creature at the same time. This is not a denial of ordinary Christian faith and behavior; it is an assertion of the Presence of God in every event or occasion of religious experience.⁴⁸ We will return to these crucial issues in the concluding part of this article.

God’s creative and this-worldly causality have to be understood in relation to each other as distinct but working within each other.⁴⁹ This requires an insight into how a

basis for properly understanding God’s action in the world—both God’s universal, creative action, and God’s special action.” Stoeger, “Conceiving Divine Action,” 226.

46. Aquinas writes that “because no creature has an absolutely infinite power, any more than it has an infinite being, . . . it follows that no creature can create.” *ST* 1, q. 45, a. 5, ad 3. But the reverse is also true: Because all things operate according to their nature, God as infinite creator cannot act as a finite being, but operates precisely as creator sustaining finite beings in existence.

47. Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3, chap. 70.

48. God’s special action in history is often conceived in terms of God acting as a secondary cause. But it seems more coherent to conceive it as an influence which works in and through secondary causes as a mode of God’s universal creative action. Stoeger, “Conceiving Divine Action,” 240.

49. God’s primary causality is postulated as operating within, not upon, finite reality. The mind grasps this through what may be called an intuition of levels of reality that correspond to different questions being asked. Once this is in place, it guarantees the integrity of the sphere of secondary causes. Because “primary cause is the source of existence, it effects its own work in the actual structured patterns of relationships through which is realized the ordering of the world.” James Pambrun, “*Creatio ex Nihilo* and Dual Causality,” in Burrell, *Creation and the God of Abraham*, 192–220 at 219.

single effect emerges out of two distinct causes. How do infinite and finite causes relate to each other? From the perspective of God's creating first causality, God, as the ground and energy of being itself, provides the power of being by which the finite agent operates. From the perspective of finite agency, it is altogether natural that a finite cause produce effects according to its finite nature. The point is that these two causalities operate together on different planes. As Aquinas writes, "It is also apparent that the same effect is not attributed to a natural cause and to divine power in such a way that it is partly done by God, and partly by the natural agent; rather, it is wholly done by both, according to a different way, just as the same effect is wholly attributed to the instrument and also wholly to the principal agent."⁵⁰ This "wholly" language means that these agencies are not over against each other; they do not exist in a competitive relationship.⁵¹ What is being described here is a non-dual unity of being in which secondary causality enjoys real being, power, and agency by the power of primary creative Presence of Being itself.⁵²

The concomitant natural and divine action sheds light on evolution. Science from its many different perspectives analyzes the processes by which evolution moves through time. On the basis of many motives for faith, theology recognizes a divine agency in the whole process as well as in its minutest detail. And as in twentieth-century physics, the factor of time has become a major element in this vision. Creation is a narrative; creation is still moving through time; creation is unfinished. This brings eschatology back into the picture. The future becomes a necessary consideration for understanding anything that is in motion. This leads to a conception of the human that is incomplete, moving forward, into reality spread out in front of human consciousness, and into a future in which human beings may consciously and responsibly participate.⁵³ Human action ordinarily involves orientation towards an outcome. Evolution thus invites a reorientation of Christian self-understanding toward cooperative action, supported by God's creating Presence, and oriented towards a goal. In this way, evolutionary creativity infiltrates into every facet of Christian self-understanding and theology.

50. Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3, chap. 70.

51. Hans Küng, *The Beginning of All Things: Science and Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 157–59. As Johnson puts it, "In this system of thought it is incoherent to think of God as working in the world apart from secondary causes, or beside them, or in addition to them, or even in competition with them." Johnson, "Does God Play Dice?" 12. John Webster recognizes the fallacy of a competitive view that encourages a choice between the glory of God or the initiative of human existence. John Webster, "'Love is also a Lover of Life': *Creatio ex Nihilo* and Creaturely Goodness," *Modern Theology* 29 (2013), 156–71 at 167–68, <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12027>. I cite Webster to show that these distinctions engage philosophical and evangelical theologians alike.

52. "It is also evident that, though a natural thing produces its proper effect, it is not superfluous for God to produce it, since the natural thing does not produce it except by divine power." Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 3, chap. 70.

53. John F. Haught, "Cosmology and Creation," in *Christianity and Science: Toward a Theology of Nature* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007), 128–30; and in a more thoroughgoing manner in Haught, *Resting on the Future: Catholic Theology for an Unfinished Universe* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015).

Let me sum up here: we have come a long way from a simple conception of creation meaning that God put everything into existence a long time ago and thus is responsible for all that is. The idea of creation is subtle and filled with dimensions that invite new scientific discovery. Transcendence and immanence seem like antagonistic ideas, yet they name qualities of the same God; each is understood to entail the other when God is not *a* being but pure act. The relationship between God's first causality and Presence within all finite causality enjoins a non-dual unity of two distinct dimensions of being and movement. Reality cannot be fully measured on the surface or reduced to sensible data. The idea of God's special action in history fades away; the particularity of God's action in any event does not require it, because God's action as first cause always operates particularly within individual beings and events.⁵⁴ Recognition that the primary action and causality of God is entirely different than the activity observed within a finite world and yet inseparably entailed within it is utterly basic. The two forms of causality introduce a new deep perspective that simultaneously revises simple understandings of the dynamics of reality and transforms faith and science as different but complementary ways of interpreting the same phenomena. Evolution describes in empirical terms the constant dynamism of creation. It provides a magnificent witness to the power of God's creativity. It suggests visible clues to how God's creating in this universe is unfolding, even though that remains utterly mysterious on an empirical level. And this creating is still going on.

The Resonance of Creation Theology

Repeating something said earlier in this chapter, the idea and word "God" carries an imperative to respond. "God" engages and solicits a response because God purports to make a total difference in life. By extension, the theology of creation sets out a vision of reality whose affirmation would carry a set of human reactions, attitudes, convictions, and affective responses that correlate with the set of affairs that are described. "The issue of creation is not just a question about things but a question about ourselves as well."⁵⁵ Or as David Kelsey points out, affirming something is a self-involving utterance. "To affirm the doctrine of creation from nothing is to take on oneself a range of attitudes toward, and intentions to behave in certain ways in, the world."⁵⁶ This

54. Stoeger explains how so-called "special divine action" can be understood as a subset or aspect of primary causality, because primary creative causality always occurs within concrete particular events. "Again, the divine creative relationship is highly differentiated with respect to each entity and system within the universe—and God's action flows from the character of that relationship." In short, one should understand "special divine actions as richly differentiated modes or expressions of God's universal creative action." Stoeger, "Conceiving Divine Action," 246–47; also 240. Ironically, the same insight can be preserved by saying all of God's Presence in the world is "special" because it always entails Presence to and being mediated to our consciousness by particularity.

55. Robert Sokolowski, "Creation and Christian Understanding," in Burrell and McGinn, *God and Creation: An Ecumenical Symposium*, 179–92 at 183.

56. David Kelsey, "The Doctrine of Creation from Nothing," in *Evolution and Creation*, ed. Ernan McMullin (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 176–96 at 178.

concluding section will underline several fundamental moral attitudes that seem intrinsically to accompany an appropriation of a theology of creation along the lines that have been laid out here.

First of all, God as pure immanence to finite being provides a basis for the value of the self, the human person, and the world. Acceptance of the doctrine of creation implies the acceptance of God who is personal. This simple assertion occludes the deepest of mysteries, because God cannot accurately be imagined as *a* person, and sometimes context seems to relegate God to the impersonal sphere.⁵⁷ But fixing on God as loving creator radically transforms an impersonal world. Without altering a single fact, recognition of a personal creator God gives everything a new, deeper, personal, intentional, meaningful character, even though these qualities remain mysterious. Value plays a major part of the transformed character of reality viewed within the framework of creation. Value means the quality of having importance in itself. Creation dialectically bestows in-itself importance on what is created. This paradox constitutes the very logic of creation: God creating something other than God, giving it an “in itself,” which is absolutely dependent on God. The person who believes in creation also believes in the ground, or intrinsic reason why, especially human life cannot be cheap. The frequently confessed absolute value of human life seems more sentimental than grounded. Yet the immanence of God to all that is bestows a seriousness on the world, human life, and self-disposition that they cannot have without it.

God as pure transcendence provides a basis for facing reality with hope. The transcendence of God, too, summons forth fundamental moral commitments. One is negative: if God is God, then no finite reality can assume that position. The intuition of God’s transcendence includes within itself recognition of the fundamental inversion of idolatry, which, when it is deliberate, is an active moral failure. The world is not God, and nothing in it or of it is God. A relation to God immediately exposes idolatrous claims even in the act of their seducing or oppressing our freedom.⁵⁸ At the same time, the same intuitive feel for the transcendence of God supplies the hope (Schillebeeckx) and courage (Tillich) to work through all obstacles to freedom that the world serves up. In the view of Schillebeeckx, impasse, blockage, and negativity consistently bring out from our deepest inner resources hope that existence is positive, and that being offers the motive force to meet the challenge. Resistance to human suffering itself, especially in praxis, reveals a fundamental human hope that gives humans a glimpse of an objective hope, or a possible object of hope:

57. The taut character of this tension must be honored; the mystery of God includes, for some, an experience of God’s personal love in creation and, for others, God’s absolute or cruel absence from it. See Jon Sobrino, “Where is God and What is God Doing in the Tragedies?” in *Where Is God?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004), 124–46.

58. Creation out of nothing means “that the world genuinely is other than God but also implies one has the attitude of respect rather than reverence toward all that is not God. Reverence is an attitude appropriate to what is divine. Creation is other than God. There is no aspect or component of creatures that is unqualifiedly ‘divine.’” Kelsey, “The Doctrine of Creation from Nothing,” 180.

All our negative experiences cannot brush aside the “nonetheless” of the trust which is revealed in man’s critical resistance and which prevents us from simply surrendering man, human society and the world entirely to total meaninglessness. This trust in the ultimate meaning of human life seems to me to be the basic presupposition of man’s action in history.⁵⁹

We’ve seen earlier how Tillich finds within “the courage to be” the power of being that implicitly enables it.

The glory of God resides in creation’s evolution. Internalizing an understanding of evolutionary creation also releases the fundamental moral disposition of gratitude. The Christian spontaneously ascribes freedom to the power of God creating, and assigns love as the motive of the enterprise. When this understanding of all reality has its scope narrowed to a focus on an individual’s existence, as Ignatius Loyola does in his “Contemplation to Attain Love,” the natural response of the person is gratitude overflowing into love.⁶⁰ In the normal run of things, when one achieves a certain amount of self-possession, a sheer appreciation of and gratefulness for one’s being has the potential to become an integral part of one’s identity. Gratitude fits snugly into the core of the basic moral disposition and freedom of the Christian.

But we have not yet factored in the reality that the state of existence of many people may be so dehumanized that they are unable to appreciate the sheer value of their own existence; that has to enter into the discussion. The experiences of impasse, sometimes unto death, of persistent massive dehumanization, and of evil cast a shadow over the positive glory of God manifest in creation. Whereas the distinction between God’s “causality” or Presence clearly distinguishes God from the mechanisms of finite matter, it also seems to undermine the practice of the prayer of petition engrained in Abrahamic faiths. First on a metaphysical level and then practically, what is going on when we pray to God out of our need?

Further reflection on the non-intervention of God actually shows how deeply it supports the Christian practice of prayer of petition. The logic of petitionary prayer may be depicted in three aspects. The first consists in the sense of radical dependence that is presupposed in turning to God in need. As Rahner states it, “Such prayer is the cry of elementary self-preservation, a naked expression of our instinctive clinging to life, arising from the very depths of human life and human anguish.”⁶¹ The prayer implies a recognition that one’s personal life and identity radically (in its being) depends on God. Therefore, second, while this may or may not be recognized, God’s response to such prayer is included in the prayer itself. For God is the already present and personal power of being within the person who prays. As was earlier said in passing, it makes no sense at all to emphasize the non-intervention of God into the world when God is already fully personally present to the world and to each person in it. Third, what may

59. Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Understanding of Faith: Interpretation and Criticism* (New York: Seabury, 1974), 96–97.

60. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, trans. and commentary by George E. Ganss (Chicago: Loyola, 1992), paras. 230–36.

61. Karl Rahner, *On Prayer* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1993), 76.

be lacking and really being prayed for is an active recognition of God's Presence and its translation into courage, action, and hope for a resolution of the impasse. God does not do in the world what human beings are called to do. But God is Presence, who accompanies and empowers.

How does this translate to the psychologically conscious level of everyday spirituality? What would God be like if God responded to my wishes and not others'? What would God be like if I were grateful to God for saving my life in a plane crash but not the lives of others? The issue lies in the character of God's response to human need. All human fears and limitations should be laid before God in prayer of petition. As Juan Luis Segundo puts it bluntly, "If our love is faced with the illness of a loved one, it is only logical that it find expression in a petition for that person's health. To ask for this is not to ask for miracles. We are simply voicing the limit confronted by our love, and the victory of our hope over that limit."⁶² Rahner makes the point that petition should be childlike in submission to the will of God. Fair enough. But Segundo, by contrast, thinks of the prayer of petition as a consciously adult act of responsibility. We need to be empowered to do what we have to do. The child asks his or her father for many things; the adult Christian asks the Father for the gift of the Holy Spirit (Luke 11:13).

Finally, in parallel with and perhaps drawing on the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, Teilhard de Chardin speaks of a creation spirituality that is sustained by the two hands of God. Ignatius proposes these two dimensions underlying a spirituality based on creation theology. First, God sustains in being each individual person because God's primary creative agency holds each being in existence, thus working within every gene riding on every DNA molecule. Second, by indirection, God works for the individual through every external agent that accompanies a human person through every stage of growth.⁶³ Teilhard calls these two simultaneous empowerments the two hands of God, the one directly internal to one's being, the other from outside the person.⁶⁴ Both Teilhard's conception of a universal structure for every person as a framework for gratitude and Ignatius's contemplative exercise that leads a person to some intimate appreciation of it pack the power of the structure of reality itself, namely, the evolutionary ontology of creation.

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62. Juan Luis Segundo, *Our Idea of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1974), 46.

63. Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises*, paras. 235–36.

64. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu: An Essay on the Interior Life* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1960), 47–51. Teilhard also calls these two vectors constituting every person the "double thread of my life" (50–51). The two hands of God correlate with God's primary causality and God operating through secondary causes.