

Views from the Pews: The two aspects of creation theology

The Hebrews' faith in Yahweh ("the God who creates continuously") was forged out of their experience of the Exodus, that established their firm belief that the God of Abraham was stronger than the gods of their pagan neighbours. They were convinced that the only reason that the universe exists is that God delights in it for itself, and positively *wants* it to exist - and if God were ever to cease upholding it, there would be nothing. They wanted to know only about *how things are*, not about *where they came from*. The historic (Biblical) creationist tradition summarised in Genesis 2 is therefore far older and more fundamental than the recent concept of "creationism" espoused by modern fundamentalist sects, and the two have very little in common.

Only about 200 years BCE, the additional idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, creation out of nothing, appeared, but it was not incorporated into church doctrine until the end of the second century AD. None of the great prophets and wisdom writers of the Old Testament were aware of it, although it became very influential in the Hellenistic world of the New Testament. It so happens that the Priestly creation story in Genesis 1 is broadly compatible with contemporary scientific cosmology, which sees the origin of the universe in the so-called "Big Bang", but that is not the point of P's story.

During the course of history the balance between the two interlocking aspects of creation theology, concerning *dependence* versus *origins*, became lost. By at least the end of the eighteenth century, and certainly by Darwin's time, Christian creation theology was emphasising the idea of an original act, the *beginning* of life, much more than the older idea of a continuing process of *upholding* the ongoing conditions for life. That distortion of the Biblical insight led directly to contradictions with science, and secular ridicule of what became Genesis 1's six day 'red herring'. It undermined Darwin's faith, and still does that of many young people trying to decide which story to believe. They often reject the idea that Christianity could be rational or relevant to this age because they do not know there is any such thing as serious, critical theology, or because their view of what the church stands for has been coloured by the failings of its members.

The desolation of today's world is largely because we fail to take *both* theology *and* science seriously.

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