

Christ and Creation – Early Christian theologians on Christ’s ownership of creation

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ABSTRACT

Confessing a good creation was not an independent issue for early Christian theologians. They stressed creation because according to their opinion only an independent Creator can be truly God (Athenagoras). The eternal God can deal with temporal things because He is acting by his Word and Spirit (Irenaeus). The core of the doctrine of creation, however, is its Christological focus: if Christ would not be the Creator He would not have come to his own and thus would be taking someone else’s property. That would not be salvation but a crime (Irenaeus). Only after the conflicts on creation had been settled could Christian theology deal with the topic in a more relaxed sphere. That is the case in the catechetical lectures of Cyril of Jerusalem who teaches his pupils to enjoy the beauty of creation in the freedom of Christ. The early Christian approach might be an eye opener for Christians’ dealing with creation nowadays.



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Christian faith is about Christ. Christ is the very core of Christian belief. And thus the earliest form of the Creed is a simple Christological statement: “Jesus is Lord.” This basic confession is extended by referring to his birth, his death and his resurrection. In all classical creeds is the Christological section their core.

Soon, however, such Christological statements are preceded by an article about God the Creator. Nowadays, it may seem obvious to speak about God as Creator, but in antiquity that is not the case. From such a perspective it is interesting to consider why it is that Christians so emphasized creation; even more so since Christ – as the focus of their faith—is said to have come as a judgment over the world. In this article we explore three discourses on creation that are exemplary for early Christian understanding of creation. They show how church fathers argued for believing in God as the Creator of a good universe and what the consequences are for Christians’ attitude towards nature.

1 ONLY A CREATOR IS A TRUE GOD

We find the first extensive discourse on the Creator in Christian literature in Athenagoras’ *Plea for the Christians*. Athenagoras argues that the gods of the Greek have a beginning. Zeus, who is born from Saturn and Ouranos, has a beginning as well.¹ It was common sense in Greek philosophy that what has a beginning has also an end. It is therefore Athenagoras’ argument that the gods of the Greek are not eternal. These gods are not being but belong to the sphere of becoming.² They are part of the world of all phenomena that have an origin in time and an end in time. “How can the constitution of these gods remain, who themselves are not self-existent, but have been originated?”³

Christians confess a God who is different. Their God is not a part of this world. This God is the Creator of the world.⁴ God has no beginning and will have no ending. God

1 “If Kronos is time, he changes; if a season, he turns about; if darkness, or frost, or the moist part of nature, none of these is abiding; but the Deity is immortal, and immoveable, and unalterable: so that neither is Kronos nor his image God. As regards Zeus, again: If he is air, born of Kronos, of which the male part is called Zeus and the female Hera (whence both sister and wife), he is subject to change; if a season, he turns about: but the Deity neither changes nor shifts about” (*A Plea for the Christians* 22). See also *Plea* 17.

2 Athenagoras (*Plea* 6) assentingly quotes Plato: “Whatever is compounded can be dissolved.”

3 Athenagoras, *Plea* 19.

4 “The multitude, who cannot distinguish between matter and God, or see how great is the interval which lies between them, pray to idols made of matter;” but “we do

is eternal. Only a Creator who is totally different from the world can be everlasting and thus truly be God. We “distinguish God from matter, and teach that matter is one thing and God another, and that they are separated by a wide interval because the Deity is uncreated and eternal, to be beheld by the understanding and reason alone, while matter is created and perishable.”⁵ Thus the first interest of Christians in confessing the Creator is to guarantee God’s divinity, in contrast to the perishing pagan gods.⁶

The Creeds of the early church do not refer explicitly to the eternity of the Creator. Yet it is indicated by the word “Father”. Because Christ lived on earth, is born and has died, Christ could be considered to be one of the dying and reviving gods of the antique world, a mere expression of coming and leaving, leaving and coming as the world goes. The Creed says that Christ is the Son of the Creator of heaven and earth: He belongs to a different category. His coming is anchored in the eternity of the Creator of heaven and earth. Therefore his birth is not a beginning but an acting and coming. The confession of the Father is a guarantee for the belief that Christ is really God.⁷

Christians did not invent this idea of an eternal Creator. They lived with the Old Testament, and the prophets of Israel already made the same claim about the God in Whom they believed.⁸ The gods of the gentiles are creations of human beings, even the handiwork of them. They cannot help human creatures because they are not

distinguish and separate the uncreated and the created, that which is and that which is not...” “They are at the greatest possible remove from one another – as far asunder as the artist and the materials of his art” (*Plea* 15).

5 Athenagoras, *Plea* 4.

6 Christian theologians are more positive about Plato who not only stresses that true divinity is one and thus everlasting, but also once speaks about God as Creator. See Meijering 2004:187, 296f. Athenagoras refers also to other Greek philosophers and poets, who have at least some idea of what real divinity should be, “even against their will” (*Plea* 7). “For poets and philosophers, as to other subjects so also to this, have applied themselves in the way of conjecture, moved, by reason of their affinity with the afflatus from God, each one by his own soul, to try whether he could find out and apprehend the truth; but they have not been found competent to apprehend it fully, because they thought fit to learn, not from God concerning God, but each one from himself” (*Plea* 7). See also Justin the Martyr, *Dialogue with the Jew Trypho* 5: “For God alone is unbegotten and incorruptible, and therefore is God, but all other things after God are created and corruptible.”

7 Cf. Athenagoras, *Plea* 10: “The Son of God is the Logos of the Father, in idea and in operation.”

8 Cf. Athenagoras. *Plea* 9.

gods. Only the almighty Creator who has no beginning or ending and who does not get tired is a true Saviour.⁹

2. GOD'S HANDS

If God is eternal and the world is becoming, how is it possible to say that both interact? How can an eternal Being even create transient beings? The problem of the relation of being and becoming has haunted Greek philosophy from its very beginning. The church father Irenaeus has a simple answer to this problem: it is because God is acting, for God has hands, namely the Son and the Spirit.¹⁰ God is not a *Deus otiosus* without any motion. On the contrary, acting belongs to God's very identity. This God is the living God, as the prophets taught. Irenaeus likes the metaphor of the Son and the Spirit as God's hands. They are the way God is acting. They are God's *own* hands. Therefore they are not different beings, and thus there are not three Gods. When my hands act it is I myself who acts. When the Son and the Spirit act it is the very same God who is acting as the Father is acting. It is precisely because the Father is living and acting that they act.

The doctrine of Trinity is not an unsolvable mystery but an expression of the belief that God is a living God, who creates, cares, saves, makes alive. It is the translation of the belief of the prophets into Greek language. It is not a philosophical construct as the solution of the philosophical problem of being and becoming but an expression of the experience of Israel and early Christianity: God is acting, interfering in human affairs. God gives victory to his people, and God gives salvation through the death and resurrection of Christ, through his own coming into the world, and by his indwelling in human beings through his Spirit. Athenagoras stresses the eternity of God the Creator, and Irenaeus God's acting in the Son and the Spirit. Both belong intrinsically together in Christian faith.¹¹

3. TO HIS OWN

Irenaeus pushes the Christological interpretation of creation further. Because Christ is God's acting presence to the world, the world is Christ's own creation. This becomes Irenaeus' core argument against the Gnostics and against Marcion.

9 This argumentation is predominant in Deutero-Isaiah, but present in the whole Old Testament. Athenagoras and other *patres* could build on a long tradition.

10 Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* IV, Preface 4; IV,20,1; V,6,1; V,28,4.

11 Athenagoras refers to God's acting in the Spirit and the Son also (Plea 10) and Irenaeus also claims God's eternity in contrast to created transitory being (*The Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*4; see also Fragment 33).

Christian Gnostics taught that Christ saved people from a lower level existence in the material world, and Marcion considered Christ as a stranger God who saved human beings from the creation of a lower demiurge. If this were true, argues Irenaeus, Christ would be a thief.¹² Christ would be taking creations of a demiurge for himself, those who were not owned by Him. That would not be justice and righteousness but a crime. Thus the salvation theory of Gnostics and Marcionites is a criminal doctrine about injustice. They confess an evil god, precisely when they claim to teach salvation of people by Christ.

Irenaeus confronts these ideas with orthodox Christian faith: because Christ is the Creator of the world, Christ came to his own.¹³ Those powers that intruded upon the world and kept it in captivity are evil spirits and this Christ is faithful by coming and saving his own creatures from these powers. “The Word of God, powerful in all things, and not defective with regard to His own justice, did righteously turn against that apostasy, and redeem from it His own property, not by such violent means as the [apostasy] had obtained dominion over us at the beginning, when it insatiably snatched away what was not its own.”¹⁴

Here Irenaeus comes to the core of his doctrine of salvation. We cannot play off creation and salvation, because salvation is liberation of Christ’s own creation. Because He created the world and He is faithful, He did not leave his people in the power of dark spirits, sin and death. Precisely because there is no injustice in God Christ has come and saved his own people. Christians confess this just and good God. Therefore they confess God as both Creator and Saviour. Irenaeus does not get tired from stressing that the world is Christ’s own creation and that He saves his own handiwork.

12 *Against heresies* V,2,1: “And vain likewise are those who say that God came to those things which did not belong to Him, as if covetous of another’s property; in order that He might deliver up that man who had been created by another, to that God who had neither made nor formed anything, but who also was deprived from the beginning of His own proper formation of men. The advent, therefore, of Him whom these men represent as coming to the things of others, was not righteous; nor did He truly redeem us by His own blood, if He did not really become man, restoring to His own handiwork what was said [of it] in the beginning, that man was made after the image and likeness of God; not snatching away by stratagem the property of another, but taking possession of His own in a righteous and gracious manner.” See also *Against heresies* III,11,2; IV,18,4; V,18,1.

13 *Against heresies* IV,20,2. See also *Proof 3*: “God is not ruler and Lord over the things of another, but over His own.”

14 *Against heresies* V,1,1.

It is in the conflict with the Gnostics and Marcion that the Christian doctrine of creation reached its apex. The doctrine of creation and providence is not a mere general idea about the power of a caring or a capricious God, as it was often conceived in later times – especially in Reformed circles. Creation has to do with the legitimacy of salvation. Salvation would be injustice – and thus not salvation at all – if Christ is not the Creator and Owner of the universe.

Irenaeus did not invent this relation of Christ and creation. It is very much rooted in the New Testament and is broadly present in the main New Testament *corpora*. Because Irenaeus himself claims to stand in the Johannine tradition,¹⁵ it is obvious to first look in the Johannine corpus of the New Testament. This begins immediately with the theme of Irenaeus: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”¹⁶ John continues: “He came to that what was his own.”¹⁷ He is not a stranger, but the expression and revelation of the Father. “No one has ever seen God, but the only begotten God ... has made him known.”¹⁸ The expressive language of the Apocalypse tells us that only the Lamb is worthy to open the seals of world history and the identity of creation.¹⁹

However, it is not his reference to John that has become Irenaeus’ most famous theological contribution in the history of theology. That contribution is his concept of recapitulation. “For the Lord, taking dust from the earth, molded man; and it was upon his behalf that all the dispensation of the Lord’s advent took place. He had Himself, therefore, flesh and blood, recapitulating in Himself not a certain other, but that original handiwork of the Father, seeking out that thing which had perished.”²⁰ The idea of recapitulation finds its roots in the Pauline tradition, especially in Ephesians 1: It was God’s good pleasure “to sum up all things in Christ, the things in the heavens, and the things upon the earth.”²¹ Colossians 1 stresses the same theme: “The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.16 For in

15 *Against heresies* IV,33,4; Fragment 2.

16 John 1:1-3 (NIV).

17 John 1:11.

18 John 1:18. The Greek tekst has *monogenestheos*. Most translations do not like this expression and opt for a minimizing translation.

19 Revelation 5:5.

20 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V,14,2. The concept of recapitulation occurs often in Irenaeus’ work.

21 Eph. 1:10 (ASV).

him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”²²

The texts from Ephesians and especially from Colossians are often used as *alocus probans* for the theologoumenon of the cosmic Christ. As such, there is nothing against this concept. However, it does depend on the way it is elaborated. If it develops from a cosmic theory – into which Christ fits as the apex stone and as the human being that is the fulfilment of everything human beings are longing for – it is contrary to the New Testament argumentation. The latter is instead about Christ who came to save human beings, about Christ in Whom we have salvation by his death on the cross, in his blood.²³ Subsequently the letters confess that He is the head of all, just like the prophet Isaiah argues that the salvation is certain because God is the almighty Creator.²⁴ Salvation is first in the argument, and the cosmic power of Christ thereafter. It is not even about the guarantee of salvation but is the very expression of its comprehensiveness.

The synoptic tradition has the same sequence in a somewhat different perspective. Matthew relates the doctrine of creation to providence. Providence is not a general idea for him. Jesus says: “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”²⁵ The Kingdom comes first – and the Kingdom is Christ, the *autobasileia*.²⁶ First of all, people should be in Christ and follow Him – and the rest is a giveaway. In the Kingdom, which is Christ, nobody will be in want.

If we think about creation, it has to be in the perspective of salvation – or better it is in the perspective of Christ. Because He is our Saviour, He is good and just. Christ is light and no darkness is in Him. The world is his own world and we belong legitimately to Him. When Christ shed his blood as a ransom for many²⁷ was it not because the devil has any claim on us that Christ should have to pay. It is only for the

22 Col. 1:15-17.

23 Col. 1:20.

24 Is. 40:12-31.

25 Matt. 6:33.

26 Origenes, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* XIV,7: “For He is the King of the heavens, and as He is absolute Wisdom and absolute Righteousness and absolute Truth, is He not so also absolute Kingdom?”

27 Mk. 10:45.

sake of God's own justice, because we were sinners. Therefore, Irenaeus speaks of a re-capitulation: the new creation is the restoration of God's own creation.

In the confrontation with pagans, Christians argue for God as Creator, as the only true God, and they give a Christological and pneumatological deepening as an argument that this eternal God is able to create beings in time and space who are limited, with a becoming and an ending. In the confrontation with heretics they stress that the world is Christ's own. So for the internal debate of the church, a Christological approach is essential in order to keep salvation and creation together. At the front-line in the second century were people who denied the good creation, while presently often an independent doctrine of creation is developed, without any Christological influence. Therefore it is urgent in our time to stress once again the unity of creation and salvation, and to consider that the doctrine of creation is developed from a soteriological (that means: a Christological) perspective. It is not about emphasizing creation as such, but about the world that God loved so much that he sent his one born Son for its salvation. If we speak about creation without taking the concept of recapitulation into consideration we get in great trouble. We then enter into the dark providence of an unknown God, or in a flat idealism of a caring Father – which does not at all fit the many dimensions of hard reality. It is in the perspective of Christ that the world gets its perspicuity: without Christ it is a dark mystery or an existence of mere coincidence.

4. THE BEAUTY OF CREATION

The doctrine of creation entered a new phase in the fourth century. An apology against the pagans was no longer required after the Constantinian turn. Now the pagans themselves were in the defence. That God is the almighty Creator was no longer a contested matter of debate. Heretics continued to roam in the church but it was no longer creation that was the burning issue. It was now about Christ Himself. Gnostics and Marcionites were silenced during the third century when the cultural climate changed. Now that apology and refutation of heresies about creation were no longer urgent Christian theologians could reflect on creation in a more relaxed atmosphere.²⁸ It is this approach that we find in the catechetical lectures of Cyril of Jerusalem in the middle of the fourth century. Cyril's lectures display mainstream orthodox theology of that time, summarizing earlier Christian thought for a new generation of Christians. He is a major source for discovering what Christians of the

28 It is remarkable that Augustine (*Confessions* XI-XIII) after his connection with the Manicheans reopens the debate on creation. He once again puts the question how an eternal God can create temporal beings.

first centuries thought and taught when they were not challenged by fierce external or internal debates. It is an expression of a relaxed orthodox Christian faith – the good life of Christians in the community of Christ.

Cyril's ninth lesson deals with creation. He tells his catechumens about the beauty of plants and animals and the wonders of nature. It is as if he goes into the fields with them and points to flowers and birds: "Look at that!" "Observe, I pray you, the spring, and the flowers of every kind in all their likeness still diverse one from another; the deepest crimson of the rose, and the purest whiteness of the lily: for these spring from the same rain and the same earth, and who makes them to differ? ... Admire also the great thickness of the knots, which run round the reed, as the Artificer has made them. From one and the same earth come forth creeping things, and wild beasts, and cattle, and trees, and food; and gold, and silver, and brass, and iron, and stone. The nature of the waters is but one, yet from it comes the substance of fishes and of birds; whereby as the former swim in the waters, so the birds fly in the air."²⁹

What the observations of Cyril make specifically Christian is the context of his teaching. It is teaching about God. When he points to a rose or a bird, he points to God at the same time. "Look at that, how wonderful God made it!" "Is not then the Artificer worthy the rather to be glorified?"³⁰ The admiration of nature urges to adoration of the Creator. We do not live in a neutral nature with beautiful things but in a wonderful work of a Maker. Enjoying his work is enjoying Him. Though I am fully part of the community of all created beings, they are also given to me as a wonderful gift of God – and we believe that Godself also enjoys this creation. "God saw all that he had made, and it was very good."³¹

The context of Cyril's teaching on creation is his teaching about God. It is, however, even more specific: it is about God in Christ. Before Cyril gave his lesson on creation he taught about baptism.³² Baptism is at the beginning of all his teaching. It is only in the perspective of living in the community of the body of Christ that one can discern what is best. When Cyril continues his teaching after the lesson on baptism he begins by quoting Colossians 2:8: "Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world."³³ That is

29 Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechetical Lecture 9,10. See also 9,11-13.

30 Catechetical Lecture 9,14.

31 Gen.1:31.

32 Catechetical Lecture 3.

33 Catechetical Lecture 4, heading.

also the case for the doctrine of creation. We cannot develop it without the wisdom of Christ. Cyril is fully in line with his famous predecessors such as Paul, John and Irenaeus. We look to the world through the lenses of Christology and in the reality of a new being through baptism. The teaching of Cyril is an expression of this approach. It breathes the sphere of freedom, which is characteristic for Christian life.

At this point Cyril can give us a major contribution to present day theology of creation – much like Paul and John and Matthew, and Irenaeus can do also. Recent theology of creation is often in the perspective of responsibility. Stewardship is a core concept. This creates stress for people. They are responsible for being good stewards, and do not know how to do it – or they are not willing to do so and feel guilty. Responsibility has to do with the law – and the law makes us guilty, for one does never attain the goals that the law requires. Nobody is able to secure the integrity of creation. The very existence of any human being contributes to the overpopulation of the globe and to exhausting its resources. Modern theology of creation lacks the relaxed atmosphere of Cyril's lessons. Is this due to his naïveté? I do not think so. It rather has to do with his basic paradigm: being baptized into Christ. It is the freedom about which Luther writes in his *On the Freedom of a Christian*. Luther states: "A Christian man is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian man is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."³⁴ That is not only in relation to human beings but also with regard to all living and non-living beings. Stewardship is a burden, freedom is enjoyment. That makes all the difference. It is the difference someone can experience when taking care of flowers. I could be asked to take care of the plants of neighbours who are on holiday – or it can even be my job to do so as a gardener. I am responsible for the plants doing well. Actually, I cannot enjoy them because I am always in fear that they might decay – due to lack of water or too much water, or to too much sun or shadow. I am relieved when the owners return from their journey – or happy when the owner praises me for the garden doing well.

There is also a different perspective of caring for flowers. My partner may have given them as expression of love and unity. She will never blame me if the plants will decay, for it was not about the plants but about the gift. She gave love, and love cannot decay. The flowers were merely an expression of it. In giving herself she has already given me everything. The flowers are just additional – a *donum superadditum*. Nothing depends on them. In talking care for the flowers I enjoy the love of the giver – which does not change when the flowers inevitably decay. And precisely therefore, I try to keep them as long as possible, for I love them because I love the one who brought them. That is the way Cyril enjoys nature and teaches his catechumens to enjoy it.

34 Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian* 1.

They live in the Kingdom of God, and much is added to it by Him who created the world and saved the world. He created us in a garden and we dwell in a garden that reflects his glory.

Cyril's considerations are not naïve. If we dwell in creation in the paradigm of Christ we are not shocked by death and broken flowers. We live in the world that the Crucified One created. It is *his* own and displays Christ's love: through death, through the thorns of his crown. We see beauty, not only in the crimson of the rose, but also when its petals fall away, for that is the beginning of the fruit – and when the pruner cuts the branches, or the frost kills the shrub, we know that new life will grow from death. That is life – that is life in the paradigm of Christ. It is a view on creation wherein even the behaviour of a shrike does not surprise us,³⁵ for its belongs to the creation of the One who was nailed on the wood. We do not understand the meaning of all beings but we enjoy them as creations of our good Lord.³⁶

CONCLUSION

Why is the article on creation added to the basic confession of Jesus as Lord? It is not in order to have another avenue to God and to play off Christology over against creation. It is added in order to express that Christ is the eternal God who saves his own and gives them freedom and joy – and signs of his love all along the way that Christians go in God's creation.

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35 During a series of debates of Christian theologians, agnostics and atheists, Christian apologists pointed to the beauty of creation as an argument for a good Creator. The agnostic Henk Versnel replied by referring to what shrikes do: they catch a big beetle or other insect and prick it on a thorn in such a way that it stays alive. If due to bad weather insects do not fly the birds are guaranteed of fresh food. See more extensively Theron 1996:43f.

36 Cyril, Catechetical Lecture 9,14.

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