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What God has Created will not be Lost: Constructing a more Inclusive Soteriology

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Since rejecting Marcionite theology early in the church's life, Christians have consistently affirmed that the God of salvation is also the God of creation; the God of the New Testament is also the God of the Hebrew Scriptures. With this affirmation as its foundation, my presentation today explores the relationship between creation and salvation, and the ramifications of that relationship for Christian eschatological thinking, particularly as it pertains to non-Christians. The presentation proceeds through a discussion of the following three affirmations: first, God is the creator of all; second, God is in a loving relationship with all; and third, that relationship does not end at death.

Let me make a quick comment about my terminology: I want to recognize the problems inherent in using the language of "non-Christians" or "other religions." I use these terms for lack of a better option, and in light of the fact that the context for my presentation is a primarily Christian one—and, of course, that I am a Christian theologian, speaking from a Christian perspective. I do not mean to suggest, however, that all religions can/should be judged against the standard of Christianity.

God as Creator of All

The first affirmation I want to examine is the Christian belief that God is the creator of all. Almost all Christians take this statement for granted, and perhaps do not give it much thought—of course it is so, and how could it be otherwise? However, it is worth noting that while this supposition is fundamental for Christian thought, not all major world religions use this language, or construct the God/universe relationship in the same way. For example, Buddhism explicitly rejects the notion of the Buddha as creator; and Hinduism sets the whole concept of creation in the larger context of a cyclical understanding of time, where three different manifestations of the divine are responsible for the different movements of creation, preservation, and destruction within that cycle.

For Christians, however, the claim that God is creator of heaven and earth is foundational, and there are two important theological assertions inherent in this claim that should be noted and affirmed: the love God has for creation, and the ongoing creative activity of God, which points to the ongoing participation and presence of God within creation. In order to explicate these two assertions, I want to begin by looking at how Christians envision and describe this creator God; and to do that, I want to suggest one particular "root metaphor" that we can use to unpack what theological statements about God Christians are making when we say that God is creator.

Even though, as I said, possibly all Christians agree that God is the creator, there is some debate about what this creative activity looks like, and how best to envision God the creator: what metaphor is richest and most suggestive? Even a cursory perusal of Scripture makes plain the fact that we have a variety of models to choose from when thinking about God's creative activity. For example, Ian Barbour notes the following options: the image of God as "purposeful designer imposing order on chaos," which we find in the creation stories in Genesis; "God as a potter forming an object," found in both Jeremiah & Isaiah; God as "an architect laying out the foundations of a building," from Job 38; and of course, we have multiple images of God as "Lord and King, ruling

the universe to bring about intended purposes."¹ Certainly, all of these models are important, in that they preserve key theological affirmations about God, such as God's power to bring something out of nothing, and God's absolute sovereignty over creation.

Nonetheless, I think all of these models fall short in one absolutely fundamental category, and that is what God's creative activity says about the ongoing and sustained relationship of love God has with creation. Jürgen Moltmann describes this aspect of God's creative work very nicely in his book, *God in Creation*. Moltmann writes,

God the Creator of heaven and earth is present in each of [God's] creatures and in the fellowship of creation which they share....Through the powers and potentialities of the Spirit, the Creator indwells the creatures God has made, animates them, holds them in life, and leads them into the future of God's kingdom.²

This understanding of God's generative activity leads Moltmann away from language of causality, which reinforces God's transcendence over the cosmos, to the language of creation, which allows us to view God's connection to the cosmos as "an intricate web of unilateral, reciprocal and many-sided relationships...which describe a cosmic community of living between God the Spirit and all [God's] created beings."³ Following Moltmann's insights here, then, I suggest as my root metaphor the image of God as a mother—particularly as a birthing mother—and before all the men in the room raise their eyebrows,

let me note that both Barbour & Moltmann argue that motherly images of God are particularly appropriate for envisioning the creative work of God, for a variety of reasons.⁴

The place I want us to begin with this metaphor is in Psalm 139. Let me read a few verses from that psalm:

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made...My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depth of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

We see this image echoed further in Isaiah 43:

But now thus says the LORD, [the One] who created you, O Jacob, [the One] who formed you, O Israel: do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you...because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you...Do not fear, for I am with you.

¹ Ian Barbour, *Religion in an Age of Science*, (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1990), 176.

² Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation*, translated by Margaret Kohl, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 14.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See Barbour, p. 176, where he argues that the parental analogy, particularly that of God as mother, is "a particularly appropriate image of God's relation to the world." See Moltmann, p. 88, where he argues that motherly categories best bring out that special creative work of God that consists in "letting-be."

In these lovely images, we see a God who takes an active role in the formation of each of God's children, a God who knows each of us intimately, and a God who cares about each of us passionately. And perhaps even more importantly, the Bible witnesses to the fact that God's loving, creative activity does not end at a specific moment in time, but rather is ongoing, and continues throughout our lifetime, with the promise that God is always with us, always watching over us, with the abiding love a mother has for her children.

There are several important aspects of this metaphor that I find particularly appealing. First, this metaphor affirms an intimate connection between God and creation whereby creation is not external to God, but internal to God—a very part of God's being, and thus inseparable from God, the source of all existence. Sallie McFague uses the language of “the body of God” to image this idea, writing that, “In this body model, God would not be transcendent over the universe in the sense of external to or apart from, but would be the source, power, and goal—the spirit—that enlivens (and loves) the entire process and its material forms.”

For McFague, this allows us to speak of God as “*the* inspirited body of the entire universe, the animating, living spirit that produces, guides, and saves all that is.”⁵

Second, and this point follows directly from the first, this metaphor affirms the inherent goodness of our physical bodies and, by extension, the physical world. The material creation is not simply disposable temporary housing for the true jewel, the spiritual creation. Instead, God created the physical world from God's very self and called good every aspect of our bodies, and every aspect of the physical body of the world as well. And, from the moment of creation onward, God has continued faithfully to watch over this material world with care and attention.

Finally, such an image of God affirms the love inherent in all God's creative activity—God is not a disinterested creator, or an impartial observer to the working of God's creation. I look to Job here, specifically chapter 38 and following, where God speaks of birthing the ice, and the hoarfrost of heaven; where God provides prey for the raven when its young cry to God for food; and where God describes in almost shocking detail the intimate knowledge God has of the mountain goat, the wild ass, the ostrich, the horse, and the hawk.

All this leads to the conclusion that imagining the creative God as a birthing mother allows us to see that God creates a relationship when God creates the cosmos; a relationship that is enduring, continuing on as a part of God's very being, affecting both God and creation, testifying to the reality that God will not be without us!

God is in Relationship with All

In the claim that God is in relationship with all creation, Christians affirm that God is present in all of God's creation – even and perhaps especially in the darkest, most tragic places, in the same way that a mother gives particular attention and care to her children who are in danger, at risk, and marginalized in any way. Obviously, then, this relationship crosses religious boundaries, and includes those who not only are believers in another religious tradition but even those who have no religious affiliation at all. In examining how this relationship is experienced in the boundaries of

⁵ Sallie McFague, *The Body of God*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 20.

human life, I want to start with the Christian experience, and then conclude with a possible way to think about this relationship in the lives of non-Christians and /or non-believers.

Christians—Lutheran Christians in particular—describe this ongoing, transformative relationship with God best through our theology of baptism.

For us, an ongoing relationship with God points to the transformative journey each person undertakes from baptism to the kingdom, a journey in which baptism is not only the starting point, but the touchstone as well. In her book *A World According to God*, Marty Stortz writes that

baptism removes the infant from its family of origin and adopts it into a new one. The most important name conferred in baptism is not the family name...but the name ‘Child of God.’ With baptism we receive a new identity, an identity that does not come with passport or ID card but with relationships. Within the horizon of baptism, *who we are* depends decisively on *whose* we are, and baptism signals new relationships of belonging to God and to Christ.⁶

She notes further how Luther “made baptism the site of pilgrimage,” and counseled a “daily return to baptism because baptism was the hostel pilgrims sought, a safe haven where Christians would daily be nourished, comforted, and reoriented.”⁷

I can't resist a little sidebar here. Mindy Roll, a masters student at the Lutheran Seminary in Gettysburg Pennsylvania, has done some very interesting research on the topic of theology and transgender persons, and the way in which their own transformation mimics the Christian theology of baptism.

She writes that

one gift of the transgender community to the church, seen most explicitly in the life of transsexuals, is the personification of certain theological concepts like transformation and journey....Transformation and rebirth are enfolded particularly in the life of one who is “born-again” into a new gender.⁸

She cites Matt Kaily, who writes a first-person account of a transsexual journey in his book, *Just Add Hormones*. Describing that experience, he remarks that “Going through a gender transition is a bit like being born... You can literally start your life over... And best of all, you get to choose your own name.”⁹

Roll notes that this tie to new birth and a new name have the potential to bear rich theological fruit. She refers to Kaily again, who says that

⁶ Marty Stortz, *A World According to God*, (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 40.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸ Mindy Roll, Final paper, Feminist Theologies, Fall 2008, LTSG.

⁹ Kaily, *Just Add Hormones*, 25.

Transpeople are change personified. We can, and do, reinvent ourselves, physically and otherwise. And the best thing about reinvention is that we don't have to be stuck where we were before. We can create entirely new beings out of the ashes of our former selves.¹⁰

In light of this affirmation, Roll posits that “Kailey’s language, written from the perspective of one outside the church, has startling parallels with Christian baptismal beliefs.

He writes of change as a positive process, a moving forward from the ashes (death) of one’s former self. Is this not what Christians believe happens in baptism?¹¹ What would it be like if the church could actually lift up as a theological resource the life of transgender persons, and celebrate their own experience of new life and transformation given and received in the ongoing grace and love of a relationship with God?

But what about others who are not Christian? While baptism exemplifies well this type of transformation to which Christians are called through our ongoing relationship with God, what type of experience might we point to for those outside the church, for whom the symbol of baptism has no meaning? How can we reflect upon this continuing relationship with God on behalf of believers in other religious traditions who do or do not experience something of the God revealed in Jesus Christ? While I would not presume to speak for others here, I do feel confident in speaking about God’s end of that relationship; and there is something we can assert about God’s nature that sheds some insight into the relationship God has with those outside the Christian church.

Let me begin with the series of parables Jesus tells in Luke 15—the shepherd and the lost sheep, the woman and the lost coin, and the father and the lost son. In all three of these images, we are given a vision of a very persistent God, a God who is not satisfied with a few, but wants all; a God who is both patient and determined, who refuses to give up or walk away; a God who chooses to be in relationship with everyone, even the lost and reluctant, in spite of all obstacles, all difficulties.

Another image that illustrates this same point was created at the hand of the English poet, Francis Thompson, who wrote “The Hound of Heaven,” sometime around the turn of the 20th century. It reads, in part:

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter.
Up vistaed hopes I sped;

¹⁰ Ibid., 122.

¹¹ Mindy Roll, Final paper, Feminist Theologies, Fall 2008, LTSG.

And shot, precipitated,

Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,

From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.

Here, Thompson envisions God as a hunter, a relentless pursuer of sinful humanity, who will outlast even the most inveterate fugitive; and when God finally catches up to him, it is not to punish him or harm him, but only to bring him home in safety, to dwell with God eternally in peace.

In pointing to these two images, then, what I am arguing is that because the claim about God’s desire to be in relationship with the whole of creation is a claim about God’s nature, this relationship is an objective reality, not dependent upon our subjective realization of it. Not that our own active participation doesn’t make a difference in our lives—it does, but the bare fact of God’s relationship with us, both individually & communally, does not depend on us actualizing it, or claiming it for ourselves. This relationship does not end at death

This leads me to my final conclusion: this relationship with God does not end with our death. I argue that the very fact of God’s relationship with creation is salvific, and to the degree that either final annihilation or damnation can be equated to God-forgottenness or God-forsakenness, and the absolute, final absence of God, all creation is already and eternally saved by being in a permanent, ongoing relationship with the healing, transforming, creative Spirit of God.

To support this argument, I make two claims. First, I challenge the Christian understanding of hell as signifying an eternal destination of utter Godforsakenness. Second, I posit that because Jesus “harrowed” hell with his presence, he has, in fact, destroyed it forever.

Hell is Temporal, not Eternal

Obviously, Christians agree that **our** relationship with God doesn’t end in death—far from it; in heaven, the perfect relationship we have always longed for with God is finally achieved, as we see God face-to-face, and rejoice in the fullness of God’s presence. The problem then, it seems to me, is what happens to non-Christians; and traditionally, Christians have consigned non-believers to hell, which I define here as absolute and never-ending godlessness, the everlasting “casting away from God’s presence.” Thus, I begin here with the argument that hell, if it exists, is temporal, not eternal.

In *God-The World’s Future*, Ted Peters argues that

If hell were to remain forever, it would also remain as a constant reminder that God’s will is not completely done, that God’s power is less than complete. Unless God’s kingdom is universal and all-inclusive, God is not all-powerful. Therefore, hell, if it exists, must be temporary, and once it passes out of existence all will be taken into the consummate kingdom of God.¹²

¹² God-The World’s Future, 368.

Peters here is relying on one of the classic arguments, used by different theologians through the centuries, to explain the final abolition of hell—that is, the scriptural witness that promises in the end, God will be all and all.

There are two primary places in Scripture that have been used to defend this argument: Philippians 2:10-11, "...at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father;" and 1 Cor. 15:22-28,

...for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet...

When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.

Certainly, these are not the only texts that can be marshaled in defense of the final annihilation of hell—the number varies depending on how literally one interprets the "all" in such passages—but these two have been used most consistently in the tradition over time.

It is believed that Clement of Alexandria was the first Christian writer to suggest, albeit hesitantly, that the fires of hell would, eventually, be extinguished. Clement used the Philippians passage quoted above, among others, to argue that in Christ, God has saved the whole world, and ultimately, the whole world will come to serve God and worship God. This includes, of course, those in hell.

Thus, for Clement, the whole purpose of hell was for purification; and once that function was complete, hell would come to an end. He used medical imagery, and compared the "discerning fire" of eschatological punishment with various types of curative surgery performed on a diseased arm or leg, such as amputation, and the removal of diseased tissue by a surgeon.¹³

Another line of argumentation for the ultimate demise of hell comes not from God's lordship, but rather from God's love, which, in some ways, makes it the more fitting argument for the context I present here. Romans 8:38-39 reads,

¹³ Certainly Clement was not the only one to make this argument. Most famously, perhaps, it is found in the writings of Origen, who focused on the 1 Corinthians text cited above, and reasoned from those verses that ultimately, all God's enemies would be subjected to God and worship God. For Origen, evil—and consequently hell—ultimately would be excluded from God's harmonious universe. Gregory of Nyssa should also be mentioned here, as he, too, argued for the final destruction of hell, but using a different logic. For Gregory, evil did not have true existence; only what comes from God's hand has permanent, genuine existence—evil lives only as a parasite on the good. Thus, God had no part in either creating or willing the existence of evil [and, by extension, hell]. Gregory, too, believed in the purification process inherent in punishment; and argued that once the evil was burned off, the individual would be left with a purely good will, and would, then, freely choose to be with God. Over time, everyone who needed it would go through this process, and thus hell would cease to exist.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, no things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, or anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Many theologians do not interpret the "anything else in all creation" as including hell and/or Satan, but again, from what Scripture tells us about who God is in Jesus Christ, there does seem to be warrant for at least considering the possibility that Paul, did, in fact, mean to be genuinely all-inclusive.

Read this way, this passage (and others like it), points to the reality that separation from God is never permanent; because God is eternal, and because it is in God's nature to reach out to humanity, so also is God's hand everlastingly extended in love and grace. Continually and eternally God reaches out across every gap that would separate humanity from God; and ultimately, God's loving desire for all creation will be accomplished.

This leads to my final point, based on a particular theological analysis of Christ's descent into hell. I argue that this event was not for one moment only; rather, it has eternal and everlasting significance. It is a key part of the crucifixion/resurrection event that forever defines God's relationship with humanity and the world. While certainly not everyone has interpreted the "harrowing of hell" as comprehensive—perhaps it is meant only to point to the righteous patriarchs, matriarchs, and prophets from the Hebrew Scriptures—for example—certainly it is possible to see this act of love by Jesus Christ as filling the most god-forsaken place one could ever imagine or inhabit, thereby destroying it forever. If Christ has gone even there, to the deepest pit of existence, what of "hell" is left?

Let me close this section with a quote from Hans Küng, who in his analysis of purgatory and hell, returns in many ways to the arguments of the church fathers mentioned above. In his book *Eternal Life?*, he writes,

But however the scriptural texts are interpreted in detail, the "eternity" of the punishment of hell may never be regarded as absolute. It remains subject to God, to [God's] will and [God's] grace. And individual texts suggest – in contrast to others – a reconciliation of all, an act of universal mercy.¹⁴

Conclusion & Lingering Questions

As I conclude my presentation, I want to note three lingering questions that I continue to wrestle with in my own thinking, which I believe both warrant and demand further reflection. The first is the question about that "all in all"—and specifically, I want to ask what that might mean for a plural vision of salvations. I have been very influenced by the work of Mark Heim in this area, particularly his two books, *Salvations* and *The Depth of the Riches*, in which he articulates this possibility eloquently and persuasively.¹⁵

¹⁴ Hans Küng, *Eternal Life?*, 140.

¹⁵ S. Mark Heim, *Salvations*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1995), and *The Depth of the Riches*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000).

In particular, in *The Depth of the Riches*, Heim uses the image of Dante's *Divine Comedy* to argue that there is a way for Christians to affirm the possibility of different religious ends through a doctrine of the Trinity, which allows us to maintain our understanding of salvation as communion with God [and thus unique to Christians], while still allowing us to affirm that God grants believers in other religious traditions the ends they desire, too—such as final oneness with an impersonal Ultimate Reality. My question is, Is this a desirable affirmation, a step in the right direction in interreligious thinking, or is it problematic? Is it possible to hold together both a belief in heaven for Christians, and other positive ends that culminate different types of relationships with God?

The second question I wrestle with is how to avoid the trap of Karl Rahner's "anonymous Christian." Just to explain this position briefly, Rahner felt that the grace of God comes to all humans universally—somewhat similar to what I have described here—and this grace creates in all people a longing for God. Those who respond to this longing, even though they do not know its cause, already have a saving relationship to God. And, since this grace of God has come into the world through Jesus Christ, they thus also have a relationship to Christ; again, even though they do not know it. These individuals Rahner calls "anonymous Christians." He uses this term to indicate that the source of their "positive, salvific relationship to God" is still Jesus Christ, but they are "anonymous," because they do not recognize this relationship to Christ, or claim it for themselves. While I am sympathetic to this idea, I also worry that it denies other religious tradition their own integrity, and threatens to drown them in an all-encompassing Christian wave.

Finally, the last question I want to ask concerns those who have no relationship with God at all; and in some ways, I think this is the harder question: give me a faithful Muslim/Jew/Buddhist/Hindu any day—we speak the same language game—to use Wittgenstein's term; but the atheist & agnostic are much harder to situate in God's economy of salvation. Does God compel all into a relationship? Are we all religious by nature? Modifying Rahner's language a bit, is it possible to be "anonymously religious?"

Ultimately, judging from the history of God with God's people, it seems fair to say that God chooses repeatedly to err on the side of grace, rather than on the side of judgment. I must confess that this is my preference as well; and in the end, regardless of the persuasive doctrines we articulate together as a church, I am confident that we will be wonderfully delighted and greatly surprised at who is seated around the great messianic banquet table.