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# The Doctrine of Creation in Lutheran Confessional Theology

By JAROSLAV PELIKAN

**T**HE fundamental category in the Biblical doctrine of man is the category "creature." Whatever else Christian theology may have to say about the nature and destiny of man, it says in the limits described by that category. Its picture of man as sinner, therefore, must portray him as a fallen creature. It must not make him a creature of Satan because of his sin. Nor dare theology forget that it is precisely man's creaturely derivation from God that makes his sin so calamitous. Because the category "creature" is so fundamental, orthodox Christian theology has always felt compelled to draw a line beyond which mysticism is not permitted to go. In a manner reminiscent of mysticism, it promises that its adherents become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). But, unlike classical mysticism, it insists that such participation does not abolish but rather confirms the creaturely character of the participant. From these and similar relationships it would appear that for Biblical theology man is fundamentally man the creature, be he innocent, fallen, or saved.

Seeking as they do to declare the orthodox Christian faith on the basis of the Sacred Scriptures, the Lutheran Confessions articulate their doctrine of man within this fundamental Biblical category. But because this is often more implicit than explicit in their theological discussions, an exposition of the doctrine of creation in the Confessions cannot content itself with merely reciting their outright statements on the doctrine of creation; these are sparse and disappointingly brief.<sup>1</sup> It must also probe into the way their anthropology and Christology, as well as their polemics, proceed within the confines of the doctrine of creation. They can say as little as they do about it even in the doctrine of man, at least partly because every theological statement about man is predicated of the subject: man the creature. For an understanding of the confessional doctrine of man, consequently, the doctrine of creation and of God the Creator is central.<sup>2</sup>

## I

In medieval Thomism the doctrine of creation provided a measure of sanction for the importation of Aristotelian metaphysics into Christian theology. Both Scripture and the *Physica*, so it was thought, had spoken about the world; both Scripture and the *De Anima* had discussed the human soul. If, as Thomas maintains, the existence of God can be demonstrated from the creation to anyone familiar with the creation,<sup>3</sup> then it necessarily follows that an understanding of creation — though not of *creatio ex nihilo* — is also accessible to the unaided human mind.<sup>4</sup> To this quantum of knowledge must be added the revealed doctrine that the Author of this creation is alone eternal and underived. Revelation also discloses that He is at the same time Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, trine in Person and single in Essence.<sup>5</sup> But short of this, reason can come to know the creation. Combined as it is with the doctrine of the analogy of being,<sup>6</sup> this entire assumption makes possible the synthesis in Thomism between the Scriptural doctrine of creation and Aristotelian ontology, with all the implications and consequences of that synthesis in areas like the doctrine of man.

But this entire complex of thought is by no means the exclusive property of Thomism. Large segments of non-Roman theology proceed in a remarkably similar manner. Underlying this situation is an ambiguity evident in the theology of the Reformers, an ambivalence in their attitude toward the medieval doctrines of God and Christ. The Reformers claimed to share the doctrines of God and of Christ that were the common property of all Christendom. This claim makes itself known in their acceptance of the ancient, so-called "Ecumenical" Creeds. In keeping with this claim, Article I of the Augsburg Confession is able to refer to God as *essentia*, despite all the metaphysical connotations which that word had acquired since its original incorporation into the Latin doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>7</sup>

As a matter of fact, however, the difference between Rome and Reformation was greater than the largely conventional phraseology of the two articles might indicate. How great that difference was in the doctrine of Christ's Person became evident in the controversies between Calvinism and Lutheranism. They both claimed adherence to the ancient creeds and to the decrees of the ecumenical

councils, including and especially, the Council of Chalcedon.<sup>8</sup> They both likewise professed to stand in continuity with the medieval church and its supposedly orthodox interpretation of those Christological creeds and decrees. But by the time the full implications of their respective Christologies had been explored in the controversy, it became clear that they diverged not only from each other but from the medieval interpretation as well. Significantly, they continued to maintain their claim of harmony with the Christological consensus of the ancient church.

A divergence also appeared between Rome and the Reformation in the doctrine of God, and specifically in the doctrine of God as Creator. Proceeding from his understanding of the nature of faith, Luther had insisted that the doctrine of creation, too, be seen in the light of Christ.<sup>9</sup> That is to say, Luther sought to restore the words "I believe" to their proper position at the head of the Creed. Before saying, "God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth," I say, "I believe," πιστεύω. But the πίστις of the Christian believer derives from the forgiving and reconciling act of God the Father in Christ as communicated by the Holy Spirit. It is no mere *Fürwahrhalten* according to the Confessions, as Ritschl maintained,<sup>10</sup> but it is always trust in the God who is described by the doctrine of the Trinity. And so Luther could speak as though the choice lay between Christ and atheism, with no third possibility.<sup>11</sup> This is true not only of redemption but also of creation. For Biblical and confessional theology, therefore, creation is a Trinitarian doctrine in its very nature and central structure.

Whenever Lutheran theology has failed to take this confessional insight seriously, it has tended to put asunder what God has joined together. It has dealt with the Creed as though the First Article could be considered apart from the Second; and, for that matter, the Second apart from the Third! In much of the nineteenth century it slighted creation for the sake of redemption, as Lütgert has pointed out.<sup>12</sup> But Max Lackmann has shown the extent of the continuity between the classic Protestant treatments of creation and their Roman predecessors.<sup>13</sup> The ontological discussions of such Protestant theologians consequently took on many of the characteristics of Thomistic ontology. Some Protestant theologians even advanced a form of the theory of the analogy of being.<sup>14</sup> These

were in many cases the same theologians whose expositions of the authority of the Scriptures were the most exhaustive in theological history.

If anything, the non-Roman versions of this entire problem have been complicated by the fact that the Protestant or evangelical churches have no official metaphysics, as does the Roman communion. As a result the contention that there is a relatively straight line from reason to revelation in the interpretation of being has compelled Protestant theologians to adapt their expositions of the revealed doctrine of creation to every new scientific and metaphysical theory of reality as it came along — Aristotle's, Newton's, Leibnitz', Hegel's, or Einstein's. By the time such a painful process of adaptation had been completed, the theory had itself been discarded or radically revised, necessitating a repetition of the process. The Thomists, meanwhile, have been able to content themselves with a series of footnotes to Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. Formal adherence to the authority of the Holy Scriptures and to the theology of the Confessions has not always prevented Lutheran theology from neglecting its dependence upon divine revelation when it came to consider the meaning of creation.

## II

As a theology that seeks to be loyal to the Christian revelation, the theology of the Lutheran Confessions proceeds within a Biblical view of creation. Hence it seeks not to read into the Biblical view an interpretation of reality that is not there, nor to resolve tensions which the Biblical view leaves unresolved; here as elsewhere it realizes that *zusammenreimen* is within neither God's command nor our ability (F. C., Th. D., XI, 53). In short, it strives to listen to the Word of God before it begins to speak and to speak only as the Word permits it to speak.

In addressing themselves to the problem of being, and particularly to the problem of human existence, the Confessions endeavor to understand the Word in its own terms. For example, they do not indulge in the quest of logic and philosophy for the differentia between the being of man and the being of other creatures; man is created *samt allen Kreaturen*.<sup>15</sup> Such a quest would appear to be somewhat suspect from the viewpoint of the New Testament,

at least until one has defined what it means to be a creature in the first place.<sup>16</sup> How suspect such a quest would be is apparent from the New Testament's use of ἄνθρωπος. There seem to be only two places (Matt. 12:12; 1 Cor. 15:39) in which ἄνθρωπος is definitely used to contrast man and the other creatures; and one of these, 1 Cor. 15:39, certainly does more to accentuate the problem of man's distinctiveness than to solve it.

The confessional declaration that man is created *samt allen Kreaturen* would receive substantiation from the fact that in the New Testament a dominant element in the use of ἄνθρωπος is the contrast between man and God, creature and Creator, rather than the contrast between man the creature and other creatures. Man may be false, just as long as God is true (Rom. 3:4). Even a man doing divine things remains a man and does not become a god (Acts 10:26). If a man permits some apparently divine feature to delude him into believing that he is a god and not a man, he becomes guilty of idolatry by not giving God the glory, and he is punished (Acts 12:22, 23). To refuse to see Jesus Christ as the Suffering Servant is to think humanly, not divinely (Matt. 16:23). Indeed, it is not merely the wisdom of God which is greater than the wisdom of men; but the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men, His weakness stronger than their strength (1 Cor. 1:23). For the Confessions, as for the New Testament, this is the basic contrast.

This qualitative difference between God and man would seem to mean that for the Confessions man cannot be known apart from God, who created him. The Confessions state this explicitly with regard to the depths of human sin; they seem to imply it with regard to the full meaning of his creation by God. Unlike idealisms ancient and modern, the theology of the Confessions does not permit this to be vitiated by a doctrine of the *imago Dei* that would take back with the right hand what it had rejected with the left. The very fact of the *imago Dei* means that man must be understood *coram Deo*.<sup>17</sup> For the Confessions, then, the best study of mankind is not man, but the Word of God. For by the Word of the Lord were the heavens made. Hence the central element in the Confessions' doctrine of creation is their insistence upon the primacy of the divine initiative in the creative act. It is from this

insistence that the *creatio ex nihilo* proceeds, and not vice versa.<sup>18</sup> Thus both בָּרָא and its New Testament equivalent, κτίω, are used in three ways: (1) for the creation recorded in Genesis; (2) for the creation that goes on even today, what dogmaticians call *creatio continua*; (3) for an eschatologically interpreted "new creation." Common in all three is the primacy of the divine initiative. In fact, בָּרָא in the Qal and Niphal never has anyone except God as its agent.

All three concepts of creation converge in Isaiah 45: בָּרָא is applied to the original creation in v. 12; the *creatio continua* is spoken of in v. 5; and the "new creation" (בָּרָא once more) is promised in v. 8. This chapter therefore helps form the exegetical basis of the Confessions' contention that even after the Fall, man continues to be *eine Kreatur und Werk Gottes* (F. C., Th. D., I, 34). Creation cannot mean only *creatio ex nihilo* for the Confessions, for it is in interpreting the idea of creation that some of their most existential statements are made. Perhaps the most striking such statement is Luther's masterful summary of the primitive meaning of creation by the initiative of God, even though He may use other materials and instruments (L. C., I, 26): "Die Kreaturen sind nur die Hand, Rohre und Mittel, dadurch Gott alles gibt, wie er der Mutter Brüste und Milch gibt, dem Kinde zu reichen, Korn und allerlei Gewächs aus der Erde zur Nahrung, welcher Güter keine Kreatur keines [seines?] selbs machen kann."

### III

The basic meaning of creation in the Confessions, then, is the priority and initiative of the divine action. But for Christian faith no divine action is separable from the divine action in Jesus Christ, though distinctions may be made for the sake of convenience. Nor can there be any true faith apart from Him, not even true faith in the Creator. Therefore the doctrine of creation in the Confessions cannot be relegated to some sort of natural theology, as though everyone understood the First Article and only Christians understood the Second Article. The Confessions concern themselves with the doctrine of creation because it is a Christian doctrine and a Christocentric one. Christ reveals the creation because He is at once Creator and creature. He is thus the revelation of the Creator

to the creature, but He is also the revelation of the creature to itself. The Christ of redemption also makes clear the meaning of creation.

This is adumbrated already in the Old Testament. It is specifically the God of the Covenant who in His name makes clear what it means "to be."<sup>19</sup> Against a metaphysical dualism like that of Marcion, which would separate the Lord of creation from the Lord of salvation, the Old Testament treats the God of the Covenant as the Creator; this is the theological significance of the second creation account. (Gen. 2:4ff.) The close relation between creation and salvation appears also in the story of the Flood. There the rainbow is instituted as a sign of God's covenant for the protection of the people involved in that covenant from the ravages of the created universe (Gen. 8:21, 22; 9:12-17). It is apparently an exegesis of this story when the Apology teaches that we are subject to "*legibus temporum, vicibus hiemis et aestatis tamquam divinis ordinationibus*" (Ap., XVI, 6). In a similar tone it speaks elsewhere of *siderum certi motus* as an *ordinatio Dei* (Ap. VII, 50). At the very least, the "Let us make" of Gen. 1:26 presents what Karl Barth has aptly called "das Bild eines Gottes, der zwar Einer und der allein Gott, aber darum nicht einsam ist, der den Unterschied und die Beziehung von Ich und Du in sich selber hat."<sup>20</sup>

The New Testament likewise posits a continuity in the creation and the new creation. The God who caused the light to shine out of darkness is the same God who, through Jesus Christ, shines in men's hearts (2 Cor. 4:6). The original creative fiat, "Let there be light," is, so to say, reinforced when the Creator gives the light that enlightens every man coming into the world (John 1:9). And so, as Schweizer has demonstrated, when our Lord states, "I am the Light," He identifies His coming and His being with the creative action of God.<sup>21</sup> The origin of the aeons is in the speaking of God (Heb. 11:3), but the God who spoke in the creation and continued to speak in the Prophets has spoken finally in His Son, through whom He also made those aeons (Heb. 1:2).

It is, therefore, in harmony with the New Testament when the Confessions speak of Christ as "*dieser wahrhaftige, allmächtige Herr, unser Schöpfer und Erlöser Jesus Christus*" (F. C., Th. D., VII,



44; see also par. 45). Interestingly, the New Testament descriptions of Christ's participation in the creation are not made so directly. It usually relates Christ to the act of creation by means of a preposition. Thus, creation is said to be *διὰ* Christ (Heb. 1:2; John 1:3); or, as Colossians has it, *ἐν αὐτῷ . . . δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτόν* (Col. 1:16). This indirect form is, if anything, more vivid than the direct form would be. It manifests the hiddenness of the Creator in the creation. It also points to the fact that neither the creation nor the new creation can be understood in their own light, nor, strictly speaking, in the light of each other; but that both must be understood in the light of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Initiator of both. God in Christ is the Creator.

The indirect form of ascribing creation to Christ also serves as a reminder of the other New Testament statements that interpret Christ as creature. It is the task of theology to put these two sets of statements into dialectical relationship with each other. The impact of the Arian controversy and of the conflict with liberalism has tended to obscure the fact that the humanity of our Lord, too, far from being self-evident, is a matter of faith: that if it is faith alone which can see Christ as Creator, it is faith alone which can see Him as creature. This is the sense of the Confessions' polemic against a theory "*dasz Christus sein Fleisch und Blut nicht von Marien der Jungfrauen angenommen, sondern vom Himmel mit sich gebracht*" (F. C., Th. D., XII, 25), in other words, that Christ was not a creature. The Confessions refuse to accept the contention of this and similar theories, and they insist that the orthodox truth is with those, "*die Christum nach dem Fleisch oder seine angenommene Menschheit für ein Kreatur halten*" (F. C., Th. D., XII, 29). As the essence of man is his creatureliness, so Christ's humanity is "*unserer menschlichen Natur in ihrem Wesen und allen wesentlichen Eigenschaften durchaus (allein die Sünde ausgenommen) gleich*" (F. C., Th. D., I, 43).

The creatureliness of Christ is the theme of such New Testament passages as Rom. 8:3, which figured in the controversies surrounding the Formula of Concord.<sup>22</sup> Particularly interesting in this connection are those passages which apply the title *ἄνθρωπος* to Jesus. When the devil demands that He demonstrate His divine

Sonship, Jesus replies not by pointing to power but by citing God's demands upon Him, and upon all men, as *ἄνθρωπος* (Luke 4:4). The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath, just as the Son of Man is Lord also of the Sabbath (Mark 2:27, 28). Without entering into all the problematics of the question, we can certainly see an indication of this same emphasis in the Adam-Christ schematization of Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15, a schematization which the Confessions use to demonstrate the necessity of Christ's true humanity for His true obedience (F. C., Th. D., III, 58). May this not even be the thought underlying the use of Psalm 8 in Hebrews 2? What is glorified in Christ, according to Hebrews 2, is His humanity (F. C., Th. D., VIII, 70), as many of the Biblical and patristic passages in the Catalog of Testimonies were intended to show.

Christ as Creator and Christ as creature — this is the mystery which piety adores (1 Tim. 3:16). The revelation in Christ is, then, the revelation of the meaning of the Creator and of the meaning of the creature. The two are combined in Christ, and both these aspects of revelation are combined, for example, in the first chapter of Colossians. There, as has already been pointed out, creation is attributed to Christ. There, at the same time, Christ is called the *ἀρχή* of the creation and the *κεφαλή* of the church, which is the new creation (Col. 1:18). As Burney has shown, the terms *ἀρχή* and *κεφαλή* meant virtually the same thing to a writer with a Hebrew background.<sup>23</sup> By them the writer wishes to point out the continuity of the creation and the new creation in Christ. For the New Testament it would seem that there is a much closer relation between the act of creation and the act of reconciliation than is usually assumed. And since the most explicit statements of the Confessions on the doctrine of creation come in a similar context, it would appear to follow that in the theology of the Lutheran Confessions, too, creation is to be viewed in the light of Christ, whom Article XI of the Formula repeatedly calls *das Buch des Lebens* (F. C., Ep., XI, 7, 13; Th. D., XI, 13, 66, 70). According to Lutheran confessional theology, the meaning of creation can only be read in this Book if it is to be understood aright.

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## NOTES

1. Cf. Edmund Schlink, *Theologie der lutherischen Bekenntnisschriften* (3d ed.; Munich, 1948), pp. 67, 68, which is perhaps a little more defensive than it needs to be.
2. This essay is an elaboration of the first section of my more general essay, "The Doctrine of Man in the Lutheran Confessions," *The Lutheran Quarterly*, II (1950), 34—44, hereafter referred to as "The Doctrine of Man."
3. *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 2, Art. 3, *The Basic Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*, edited by Anton C. Pegis (New York, 1945), I, 21—24.
4. *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 46, *Basic Writings*, I, 447—457; cf. the comments of Richard McKeon, "Aristotelianism in Western Christianity," in J. T. McNeill and others, ed., *Environmental Factors in Christian History* (Chicago, 1939), pp. 220ff.
5. *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 32, Art. 1, *Basic Writings*, I, 315—318; instructive in this connection are the recent remarks of Mark Pontifex, *Belief in the Trinity* (New York, 1954), pp. 68—70.
6. A stimulating evangelical discussion of the problem is H. E. Eisenhuth, *Ontologie und Theologie*, No. 13 of "Studien zur systematischen Theologie" (Goettingen, 1933). On *analogia entis*, cf. also Emil Brunner, *Dogmatik*, I (Zürich, 1946), 183.
7. Augsburg Confession, Art. I, par. 2; henceforth I shall refer to the Confessions in the body of the text by an abbreviation of the title, followed by a Roman numeral for the article and an Arabic numeral for the paragraph. On the contrast between Luther's view of God and the medieval one, which also forms the basis of his difference from medieval pictures of the Reconciliation, see Carl Stange, "Die Gottesanschauung Luthers," *Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie*, VIII (1931), 45—89, mainly in criticism of Hirsch.
8. For the Lutheran answer to this controversy see the preface of the Catalog of Testimonies.
9. Cf. the stirring analysis of Johann Haar, *Initium creaturae Dei* (Gütersloh, 1939), esp. pp. 13—27.
10. See my "The Relation of Faith and Knowledge in the Lutheran Confessions" in this journal, XXI (1950), 321—331.
11. "Ich hab sovill experientias divinitatis Christi erlebt, das ich mus sagen: aut nullus est deus aut ille est," *Werke* (Weimar, 1881ff.), *Tischreden*, I, 269.
12. Wilhelm Lütgert, *Schöpfung und Offenbarung. Eine Theologie des ersten Artikels* (Gütersloh, 1934), p. 27.
13. Max Lackmann, *Vom Geheimnis der Schöpfung* (Stuttgart, 1952), e.g., pp. 272, 273. Lackmann's study is basically a history of the exegesis of Rom. 1:18-23, 2:14-16, Acts 14:15-17, and 17:22-29, from the second century to the beginnings of Protestant Orthodoxy.
14. Werner Elert, *Morphologie des Luthertums*, I (Munich, 1931), 44—52, has shown how Lutheranism drifted into the depersonalization of God underlying this theory.
15. Cf. "The Doctrine of Man," p. 35, notes 4, 5.
16. Thus Emil Brunner's discussion of "Man in the Cosmos," *Man in Revolt*, trans. by Olive Wyon (Philadelphia, 1947), pp. 409—434, seems to be informed less by Biblical testimony than by his own idealistic presuppositions.

17. "The Doctrine of Man," pp. 35, 36, notes 9—12.
18. On the development of the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, see the historical summary of Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III-2 (Zürich, 1948), 182—188.
19. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 13, Art. 11, *Basic Writings*, I, 131, 132, for a Hellenized exegesis of this utterly Semitic declaration. Brunner's suggestion, *Dogmatik*, I, 135, is certainly well taken: "Es würde sich lohnen, eine kritische Geschichte der Auslegung von Exodus 3, 14 zu schreiben."
20. *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, III-1 (Zürich, 1945), 216. He comments a trifle crustily: "Wer hier an die Dreieinigkeit Gottes nicht einmal denken will, der sehe zu, ob er dazu auch in der Lage ist."
21. Eduard Schweizer, *Ego Eimi* (Göttingen, 1939), pp. 124—167; on "I am the Light," esp. pp. 161—166.
22. Cf. Martin Chemnitz, *De duabus naturis in Christo* (Leipzig, 1580), pp. 33—35.
23. C. F. Burney, "Christ as the ἀρχή of the Creation," *Journal of Theological Studies*, XXVII (1925—26), 160 ff.