



## **Christianity: The Basics — God and Creation**

There are two ways to approach the Christian doctrine of God: to contemplate the mystery of the Trinity and to ponder the mystery of creation. There is no sense in asking which of these two ways is *primary*, because Christians are equally committed to both the idea that God is Triune (which is just a fancy way of saying that God is Three-in-One; three and one what?, is another question for another day) and the idea that God is Creator.

Many people think that it is *easier* to begin by thinking about God as Creator than it would be to begin with the doctrine of the Trinity, but this too is a mistake, because both doctrines stretch our linguistic and intellectual capacities to their breaking point. In some ways, it is more difficult to understand God as Creator because we are familiar with many things that are a little bit like creation, such as artisanal craftsmanship or mass production or biological replication or artistic expression. The problem here is that these human activities are a little bit like divine creation, but they are also completely different: problems arise when we forget how different they are. I suppose the doctrine of the Trinity faces similar problems when people take their metaphors—about the states of H<sub>2</sub>O or clovers or eggs—too seriously. Nevertheless, I will leave the doctrine of the Trinity for another occasion, and focus here on the doctrine of God as creator.

Another stumbling block toward getting the doctrine of creation right (or, at least, avoiding getting it altogether wrong) is the widespread idea that the doctrine of creation has something to do with the *beginning* of things, in such a way that it provides an alternative explanation to the expansionary theory of the Universe

(commonly called the Big Bang Theory) or the theory of evolution by natural selection. If God created the heavens and the earth and all that fills it, some people think, then the scientists must be wrong. This idea is a mistake for various reasons, not least that the Christian doctrine of creation is simply unconcerned with how things began. If the Universe were eternal—if it had always existed—Christians would still believe that God created it, and had God not created it, the Universe would not exist, eternally or otherwise. Indeed, if God ceases to create the Universe, it would cease to be. The doctrine of Creation is not about how the universe began but about why there is ever anything at all.



William Blake. *Ancient of Days*.

The second reason that this idea—that the doctrine of creation is at odds with scientific theories about the origins of things—is problematic leads us closer to what Christians mean by “God”. For the doctrine of creation to be in competition with a scientific theory, they both have to be positing competing causal factors. For example, when we ask “Who broke the vase? Peter or John?”, what we have are two candidates—Peter and John—who are both similar kinds of things. This is still true if Peter was (as you might expect) a little boy and John was a kitten or even a hurricane. Regardless, Peter and John are both objects in the physical world: there is a category to which they both belong. This is how they can be rival explanatory candidates.

Unlike either Peter or John, God is not an object in the physical world or anywhere else; there is no category which includes both God and anything else. This is not because God is special—though of course God *is* special—but because God, being the creator of *all* things, cannot be counted among things. Otherwise, God would count among the things God created, which is nonsensical: we cannot create ourselves, whatever certain kinds of political conservatives might say about self-made men and women.

In a way, all this seems perfectly obvious. As the Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe used to observe, we never ask whether it was God or the fire that made the kettle boil. Why then would we ask whether it was God or the selection pressures in the primordial waters that made life emerge on Earth three-and-a-half billion years ago.

Now, having been told that God is the creator of all things, some people are still tempted to ask, “Who made God?”. The question makes no sense, given that God is the creator of all things and that one cannot create oneself. This entails that God is uncreated. Christians go even further than this, to say that it is the nature of God to be uncreated, simply to exist.

So, to summarize: Christians believe that God is the uncreated creator of all things, whose nature it is to exist. From this, Christians infer that God is not to be counted among things in the world: the world doesn’t consist of cats and dogs, you and me, quarks and gluons, *and God*. Or, as Terry Eagleton often says, “God and the universe do not make two”. And from that, Christians infer that God cannot *compete* against anything else for anything, like causal space or explanatory power. It seems from this that Christians who worry about the relationship between science and Christianity might be working with a deficient doctrine of God, and certainly not with the one that has been taught by Christians since St Augustine and certainly since Thomas Aquinas.

If this all seems quite abstract, I apologise. I understand that not everyone shares my concerns about the relationship between the natural sciences and the doctrine of creation. But there are many other reasons to care about how we think and talk about God as creator. The idea that God does not—indeed, cannot (and not for lack of power)—compete with the things God has made is an important starting point for thinking about why God created anything at all. It cannot, for starters, be because God needs or wants anything. God cannot benefit from our existing: the very possibility of benefit requires the parties concerned to be trucking in the same

currency, in much the same way that the very possibility of competition requires the players to be playing the same sport. The quite common idea that God made us for her pleasure cannot be right.

Similarly, the love of God for us is given without even the possibility of reciprocation, which is to say that it is unconditional. The love of God does not just happen to be unconditional: it is unconditional by God's very nature. So, the idea that God made us to love him is not right either, if we mean by this that God created the world to fulfill some need to be loved by creatures.

And finally, the Christian doctrine of God as expressed in the doctrine of creation helps us to make sense of other essential Christian beliefs, such as belief in the Incarnation. Some people think that it is impossible for Jesus to be both fully human and fully divine. But this presumed impossibility only arises if there is some kind of categorical competition going on. For example, I cannot be both a human and a dog because "human" and "dog" are mutually exclusive subcategories of animal. But God belongs to no category; God is not even a god. Because there is no possibility of categorical competition, there can be no contradiction in saying that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine.

Furthermore, when we consider the Incarnation (as we will do more fully on another occasion), we must not just imagine a very big and powerful person—even the biggest and most powerful person—becoming a normal sized person. The gap, so to speak, between divinity and humanity is unimaginably vast: indeed, notions of gaps and vastness can only serve as metaphors here. We do not, in the Incarnation one kind of thing transforming into another kind of thing, but the creator of all things becoming a thing in world, and not only that, but to suffer at the hands of other created things, even unto death.

Far from being a useless bit of metaphysical abstraction, then, the Christian doctrine of God as creator holds within it rich implications for Christian theology, and even moral and political and pastoral thought.

Jonathan Jong

The St Mary Magdalen School of Theology

<https://www.theschooloftheology.org/posts/essay/christianity-the-basics-god-and-creation>



### Suggested Discussion Questions

1. People sometimes contrast the “God of the philosophers” from the “God of the Bible”. How might Christians make sense of the apparent differences between God as described here and God as we find God in the Bible?
2. This piece ended with brief mentions of how the doctrine of creation relates to how Christians think about other things like the Incarnation and the meaning of life. Theologians have also related creation to moral and political questions. How does the doctrine of creation make a difference to *you*—if at all—and how you think about other things?
3. Do you think that science presents challenges to Christian faith? If so, why? If not, why not?