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NEW CREATION METAPHORS?

Mimesis and difference, creation and ecology.

Jordan of Saxony, the second master (general superior) of the Order of Preachers (Dominicans) - who died in 1236 - once had to lecture to the knights of the Temple who all spoke French while he was a German speaker. The lecture took place in the open air on a small square surrounded by a wall. 'Well', he said, 'if you see the head of a donkey rising above the wall, you will assume that the rest of the donkey is there as well. So if you pick up some of my words, you will be able to supply the rest of my lecture yourself.' Here we are not standing in the open air, but I hope that you will be able to follow my interpretation of the English language.

This paper starts by discussing some misunderstandings of the theological concept of creation. It clarifies the difference between the 'theological concept of creation' and 'the scientific concept of nature'. I pose two questions. Can the concepts of mimesis and difference enable us to formulate new creation metaphors? And can those metaphors help us to look at nature and ecology with new eyes?

Misunderstandings

A head of a donkey rising above a wall, some may see in this an image of creation. It is a poor image. It may suggest that the Creator is somehow an extension of our physical reality.

There are several misunderstandings concerning the theological concept of creation. A very common one is that creation is some event in the past. Some identify the beginning of creation with the so-called 'big bang' - a rather violent metaphor - or with the origin of the 'big bang'. Already Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) denied that creation was tied up with the past. It is not necessary to believe that the universe has a

beginning; it may have existed from eternity.¹ 'Creation' as such does not refer to a beginning. It is the theological expression of the conviction that the universe, the world, human beings exist thanks to a relationship with God.² God takes the initiative to relate to people and the universe here and now so that they exist.

Another misunderstanding is that both science and theology offer an explanation of the origin and structure of the world. Thomas Aquinas and his theological successors have always tried to safeguard God's transcendence and to prevent turning God in some way into a part of the universe.³ The concept of creation is a theological interpretation of the world, nature, and human nature. It does not explain the origins of physical reality; it does not give any insight into the constitution of nature or its laws. It does not say anything about its physical preservation, nor about its physical future. Science looks at physical reality as such and tries to find scientific answers to its questions. When science cannot explain certain natural events, it should not refer to God and to the theology of creation. The theology of creation tries to say something about God, about the relationship between human beings and their world with God, and about human relationships. It cannot give additional information to science or fill in the gaps in the knowledge of scientists. All the suggestions that God is somehow an explanation of the constitution or of the origins of physical reality should be rejected. For they all turn God into a part of our world.

Creation and difference

The Bible is not God's word but is a collection of human interpretations of reality from the perspective of the relationship between God and human beings. The first creation story in the Bible is such an interpretation. It tells us about a God who makes distinctions, differences in time and space. 'In the beginning God created heaven and earth', or

¹ *S. Theol.* I, q. 46, a 2.

² *S. Theol.* I, q. 45, a 3.

³ This is particularly true of E. Schillebeeckx. See: Philip Kennedy, 'God and Creation' in: *The Praxis of the Reign of God. An Introduction to the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx*, (M.C. Hilker and R.J. Schreier eds), New York 2002, 37-58.

'In the beginning there was the word' (St. John's gospel) or even, 'In the beginning there was the relationship' (M. Buber), or, 'In the beginning there was the difference' (J. Derrida). Those concepts are quite similar. Creation denotes a relationship. Creating is making a difference between creator and creature and brings about an order within the created reality by making differences. Words and acts are means of communication. Communication presupposes a relationship, a difference; it bridges the difference and confirms that the other is different. Creation is bringing about order, communication. Chaos does not precede order and communication chronologically; everything is chaos when a communicative order is missing in which relationships can flourish.

When people imitate one another and desire what the others desire violence may be imminent. Imitating one another they may lose sight of the differences between them, become competitors and rivals, and finally end up with a 'metaphysical desire', the desire to be the other person. Difference prevents this kind of process of identification running its full course. Violence is an elimination of difference and the return to chaos. Admittedly, the violence of the scapegoat mechanism brings about a difference and one often interprets this as 'good violence', but in the end it only produces more violence and repression, hierarchical relationships and totalitarianism.

In human relationships love creates a difference. Love makes people equal; it sets them free from repressive differences. At the same time love brings about and maintains a difference. For someone who loves does not want his or her beloved to become identical with him/herself. Persons who love each other remain different beings. Love as communication both bridges over differences and maintains them; like a bridge it does not annihilate the fact that there are two sides.

Creation and mimesis

According to Gen 1, 27 God created human persons in his own image and likeness, male and female he created them. Human beings are to imitate God as we read in Ephesians 5, 1: 'Try to be God's imitators'. Human beings are created in mimesis with God. They re-imagine God in finiteness, in time and place and in their mutual relationships, especially

in the relationship between women and men. Human beings are not in the image of God because they are rational beings – the traditional concept - but because they are able to communicate and to love one another. The difference between male and female symbolizes the difference that is necessary to make any authentic love possible, - homosexual love between two different males or two different females as well. Being fruitful and multiplying is not to be understood in a biological sense only, but also in the sense of creating a human culture and an ethical order.

The ethical order

The most ancient formula of ethical order, of justice, is the so-called 'lex talionis' that we find in Ex 21, 23-24: 'If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.' This law puts an end to limitless revenge, and, moreover, the idea is not to give up one's eye or tooth, but to pay proper damages. The ethical order is mimetic: to keep a balance between the good things one receives and returns, and in a similar way to keep a balance between evil things done to you and the retribution you demand.

In history we see different ethical practices. They are conditioned socially, culturally and historically. Neither the Old nor the New Testament has a specific ethics with rules that are valid in all times and at all places. Scripture, thus, cannot provide direct and infallible answers to today's ethical questions.⁴ Because every human person is different, it is not possible to decide beforehand what should be done in this or that situation. Love towards this concrete person who differs from anybody else, is the main source of the decision to be taken. However, 'no man is an island' (John Donne) so that the whole context in which someone lives has to be taken into account.

⁴ Bradford E. Hinze, 'Eschatology and Ethics', in: *The Praxis of the Reign of God. An Introduction to the Theology of Edward Schillebeeckx*, (M.C. Hilker and R.J. Schreiter eds), New York 2002, 167-184.

Creation Metaphors

Can the mimetic theory be helpful in finding other creation metaphors next to the most common metaphor, causality, which is based on mimesis as well? 'Causality' suggests that our world is an effect of a cause. Naming God the cause of an effect reinforces the idea that creation is somehow an explanation of the physical reality. Moreover it suggests that subhuman nature is to be manipulated, objectified and used at will. I prefer using metaphors borrowed from the ethical order. I propose three new metaphors, three creative initiatives: promise, mercy or compassion, and forgiveness which all refer to mimesis and difference.

A promise, for instance a marriage vow, is different from a contract or treaty. Making and receiving a promise is mimetic, but the mimesis is not symmetrical, such as in a treaty but implies a difference and is asymmetrical. A contract is based on the principle that the parties who make the contract are equal and symmetrical. They are supposed to have, at least in this matter, more or less the same power though one party may have to sell his house so as not to get bankrupt, and the other has to buy the house because of his change in employment. A promise, however, presupposes that people are not equally powerful at the same time. In a promise one accepts the obligation to be there for another person, independent of the question whether the other person is keeping his or her promise. The person to whom the promise is made has to accept the promise to make it obligatory. The person who makes the promise is not supposed to worry about the question whether the other person keeps his or her promise, but about the question whether he/she keeps his/her promise. A promise creates a new world, a new future.

Creation is a relationship of promise. By creating God makes a promise, and this is at the same time an invitation to accept the promise and to live accordingly: being creative, making order, and safeguarding the future.

Mercy or compassion is a second metaphor for the relationship we call 'creation'. When the prior of a Dominican community is going to clothe a novice with the habit - a white tunic, scapular and hood with a black cape - he asks the novice what he desires. He can hardly ask a

more difficult question, as we all know. Fortunately the Order provides the novice with the answer as well; the novice has to reply with, 'God's mercy and yours'. By this answer the novice recognizes that he is a beggar and is dependent on other persons to be able to live. He is in need of God's compassion and that of his brethren to live a life of compassion and mercy. Everything he does - preaching, studying, discussing - he is supposed to do out of mercy, for the Order he belongs to was not founded on behalf of the salvation of its members but on behalf of the salvation of other people, as the fifth master of the Order Humbertus Romanus (1254-1263) once said.

Compassion – knowing the suffering of the other secondarily - is impossible without mimesis and is only authentic when it takes the difference that the other person represents into account. Compassion is an epiphany of the other and simultaneously the opening of a new horizon.⁵ It creates the possibility for another person to exist. It is a creative event and may well make us more aware of the meaning of God's creation than a metaphor of causality.

The third metaphor I like to mention is that of *forgiveness*. Forgiveness, accepting a perpetrator as a person like yourself (Lev 19, 18), sets both the person who grants forgiveness and the person who receives it free from the constraints of the past and creates for both the possibility of a new future. Forgiveness is a 'creatio ex nihilo'. Nobody can demand to be forgiven, and for the person who grants forgiveness, it often is a miracle to discover that he/she is able to do it. Forgiveness creates a new world.

The only possibility to stop the vicious circle of violence is forgiveness. In and through forgiveness life begins anew. One is only able to forgive if one is in mimesis with people who have granted forgiveness before. Forgiveness can be a powerful metaphor of what it means to create and to be created.

These three metaphors, promise, compassion and forgiveness, can set us free from an unprofitable discussion between the theological concept of creation and the scientific concept of nature.

⁵ See: O. Davies, *A Theology of Compassion. Metaphysics of Difference and the Renewal of Tradition*, Cambridge 2001, 233.

Ecology - 'Ruling and subduing'

'Ruling' and 'subduing' in Genesis 1, 26 and 28 are to be understood in their cultural context of the Bible. For the authors of the Bible, nature is in the first place a threat, a reality to be feared, and chaos. Something is beautiful because it is ordered. From the 16th century onwards our western culture controlled and 'tamed' nature more and more. We allow ourselves to praise its beauty because it has lost the character of wildness and chaos.

Do ancient societies offer new insights that may open us to new possibilities in dealing with our natural environment? Does their reverence for 'mother earth', make nature sacred as a king or godhead, while instead western culture blames nature because of its resistance to human control? Is nature being scapegoated by both human approaches to nature?

People have always tried to use nature as a source of prosperity. As such it is an object of rivalry between individuals and nations. The economic and political order they create makes demands on the natural environment. Especially in modernity people tried to control nature and to turn it into a garden, but by doing so they expelled many plants and animals as unsuitable. The lack of variety makes the modern environment a hostile, place to live in. Nature becomes a threat to human beings once again, though along new paths. A new chaos emerges. The dream of total control over nature and culture is vanishing.⁶ This dream becomes a nightmare.

Our relationship with subhuman nature depends more than ever before on culture, on the way human beings deal with one another and live together in this world. Is there more hope for both human beings and subhuman nature if people would succeed in establishing more just relationships between themselves, make and keep promises, have compassion and give and receive forgiveness? Do we have to understand 'ruling' and 'subduing' as an invitation to establish an order of communication? We would still kill animals to provide us with food but would it be possible to take great care that they have a good life? Can

⁶ This is one of the themes in the famous novel by M. Crichton, *Jurassic Park*, London 1991, (Arrow edition), 312-313.

our environment become a promise instead of a threat or being seen as a mere stock of raw material? Can we accept the limits of our environment? Would our natural environment become our ally if we would be able to break down the vicious circles of endless competition between us? What would all this mean in practice? I still do not know, but it seems to me that we have to make haste to find out.

Jordan of Saxony, whom I mentioned at the beginning, wrote several letters to his friend Diana 'd Andolo, foundress of a Dominican convent. Both are venerated as saints in the Dominican Order. Some of those letters survived; her replies got lost. They are very loving. Many a writer of love letters would be jealous of his ability to write such letters. In his letter of the fifth of August 1234 we read: 'I have pain at *your* foot'.⁷ This is compassion. We need something of this compassion when we deal with one another and with our natural environment.

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⁷ 'Pedi tuo, quem laesium intellexi, patior' in: A. Walz (ed.), *Beati Jordani de Saxonia Epistulae*, Roma 1951, 52. See also: M. Aron, *Saint Dominic's successor*, London 1955, 177.