

Creation and Novelty

by Theodore Plantinga

I

Since I am a philosopher by training (and not a theologian), the observations I will make about the notion of creation will be essentially prolegomenal in character, that is to say, preliminary, prior to actual theological work. In offering remarks of a prolegomenal variety, I am of course assigning a certain priority to philosophical issues vis-à-vis theological work.

Much of a philosopher's work consists in setting aside terminological confusions. And so I shall begin by reminding you that the term "creation," or perhaps "the creation," is used regularly in two separate, but overlapping, senses. Sometimes the entity, i.e. the world or universe which God has made, is meant, whereas on other occasions what is referred to is the *process* by which this world came to be. When the former meaning is intended, the definite article is usually affixed to the word creation. Many of us like to wax eloquent about "the creation" and its wonders.

Now, I have nothing against enthusiastic talk about the creation and its marvels, but I would like to point out that it does not necessarily have anything to do with the Christian doctrine of creation as I shall be discussing it. The sort of thing we enjoy saying about "the creation," which we then declare to be good, beautiful, perfect, etc., is often linked in our hearts with proper concern for the environment and ecological issues. We say that we wish people truly loved the creation, realized how intricate it is, and so forth. In making such points we could equally well appeal to the Chinese philosophical tradition known as Taoism, for it has a similar view of the balanced interrelatedness of all things that together make up the world in which we live. In pointing out this similarity, of course, I do not mean to criticize Taoism and its view of nature (to use a more theologically neutral term). What we should say about Taoism in this context, rather, is that it *lacks* something, namely, a proper awareness of divine origin and supporting ground of creation or nature.

My point is that the free use of the term creation by people who often do not believe in creation in any strict Biblical sense at all can easily mislead us. One can hold Taoist-like opinions about balance in nature and still cling to the view that the world is eternal, a view that can today be expressed in the thesis that it makes no sense to seek a beginning for the world. Thus, to talk about "the creation" and to express appreciation and concern for it is not yet to get anywhere near the startling uniqueness of the Biblical notion of creation

With this terminological clarification behind us, we can look at an interesting statement by the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, who once declared: "Compared with the entire Greek system of ideas, the idea of revelation, like the idea of creation, is an absolute novelty." [NOTE 1] One of the main points I want to get across is that the

Christian notion of creation is frequently watered down, regularized, evened out, so that the absolute novelty which Ortega spotted (his insight is all the keener when we bear in mind that he was not a Christian thinker) evaporates, or ceases to function in our theology.

One more appeal to a philosopher is needed at this point. Ortega's quotation seems to open up a gulf between the Biblical tradition of thought and the Greek tradition, which is of course the fountain and pillar (two separate comparisons here to make an important point) of the tradition we call Western philosophy. Are these two traditions so different in essential respects? And is Greek philosophy, with its long line of descendants in subsequent ages of philosophy's history, fundamentally inhospitable to Biblical teaching? Many of the early Church fathers answered this question -- even more in their actual practice than in their writings -- with a resounding no. The story of much early Christian thought -- indeed, Christian theology -- is that of a mixture, and even fusion, of these two traditions. Whence, then, this almost uncharitable judgment on the part of Ortega?

I shall not seek to defend it by pointing to Ortega's own psyche or intellectual development. In support of it I will instead draw your attention to the work of a little known Russian existentialist thinker who stands in the Jewish tradition -- Lev Shestov (1866-1938), who offers us a breathtaking perspective on the history of philosophy, a perspective that links up the birth of philosophy with the manifestation of unbelief in the Garden of Eden. Shestov writes:

... Hegel was not at all embarrassed to say that the serpent had spoken the truth to the first man and that the fruits of the tree of knowledge became the source of philosophy for all time. If we ask on what side truth is, and if we admit in advance that our reason is called to pronounce the final judgment in the argument between God and the serpent, no doubt is possible: it is the serpent who triumphs.

Shestov draws a contrast between "that" and "why," between the opaque and the transparent, between revelation and self-evident truth. The repudiation of revelation in favor of self-evident truth, which we see in the history of philosophy, is also to be found in the Garden of Eden. Shestov observes:

... man, seduced by the serpent, was not content with this knowledge: the "that" (*hoti*) did not suffice for him; he desired the "why" (*dioti*); the "that" irritated him just as it irritated Kant. His reason aspired avidly to universal and necessary judgments; he could not feel satisfied as long as he had not succeeded in transforming the truth that was "revealed" and situated above both the universal and the necessary into a self-evident truth

What the philosopher and the man of unbelief have in common is that they find the notion of faith and revelation as something to be accepted in a spirit of trust deeply offensive. The first man, says Shestov,

... also wished "to know," not "to believe"; he saw in faith a kind of diminution, an injury to his human dignity, and he was certain of this when the serpent told him that after he had eaten of the fruits of the forbidden tree he would become like God -- knowing. [NOTE 2]

Shestov was calling for a recognition of the notion of "created truth." And he was convinced that the philosophical tradition, with its roots in Greek thought, could not agree to such a thing. The idea of philosophy, as interpreted by Shestov, is, in brief, the exclusion of all novelty in the name of the eternal necessity of truth. There can be no creation because thought permits no novelty: the order of things is an eternal order of necessity. The mind of man, seduced by the root human sin of pride, does not allow God to create, to bring forth something radically new.

II

I must dwell a little longer on philosophy and its relation to Christian theology. Most of us are accustomed to making a distinction between philosophy and science. We think of the latter as concerned with the discovery of new truths. This is a fair and fruitful way to conceive of the difference between the two types of inquiry, even if it is indeed the case that many major intellectual figures have functioned as both philosophers and scientists. (Today this is rather unusual: what one does see on occasion, however, is that a scientist turns to philosophy in later years, e.g. Michael Polanyi.)

What is the philosopher up to, then? One way to think of his task is to say that he assimilates, organizes and arranges the knowledge assembled by a larger human community of inquiry, without himself making major discoveries. This is certainly a fruitful way to understand the work of Aristotle, who is universally recognized as one of the greatest of all philosophers. When we review the titles of his writings, it turns out that they include a number of subjects that we would normally place outside philosophy, e.g. *Politics*, *Poetics*. Aristotle was in the business of synthesizing and interrelating; the result of his work was a virtual encyclopedia of knowledge. We see a similar pattern in Hegel, who looked back to Aristotle as a model for his own work as a philosopher. Hegel even went so far as to write what he called an *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. When one reads in this monumental work, which is often published in fragmentary editions, such as the book known in English as *Philosophy of Mind*, one sees that it deals with all sorts of subjects, including many that are not normally regarded as part of philosophy under any strict definition.

There is one particularly interesting feature of this philosophical project that I would like to draw to your attention, namely, that it presupposes what one might call the continuity postulate. In other words, philosophers in the tradition of Aristotle and Hegel are convinced that all of human knowledge is potentially -- or even essentially -- of one piece. If this is indeed so, it must be possible for all of it to be synthesized into a single system. (Hegel's notion of absolute knowledge is the strongest articulation of such a principle which the history of philosophy has ever witnessed.) This postulate, I am convinced, has snuck into Christian consciousness as well. Its consequence for our topic,

creation, is that whatever we say about creation must be continuous with the rest of our knowledge. In other words, if we follow Aristotle and Hegel, we will assume that it must be possible to make our doctrine of creation part of the encyclopedia of Christian knowledge. Without thinking much about it, we decide that it can be assimilated and made part of the system.

But is it really continuous? And should we stress continuity as a structuring principle in Christian thought? As we consider this question, we should bear in mind that one of the fundamental principles of the liberal mind in theology is this same principle of continuity. Kenneth Cauthen, an astute student of liberal thought, explains the importance of this principle in liberal thought in the following terms:

This theme manifests itself in every area of thought and permeates all liberal theology. There is practically no end to its application. It reduces the distinction between animals and men, men and God, nature and God, reason and revelation, Christ and other men, Christianity and other religions, nature and grace, the saved and the lost, justification and sanctification, Christianity and culture, the church and the world, the sacred and the secular, the individual and society, life here and hereafter, heaven and hell, the natural and the supernatural, the human and divine natures of Christ, etc. [NOTE 3]

What we can discern from this analysis is that there is an inner connection between the philosophical tradition and liberalism in theology. I must confess that I sometimes use the term "theology" in a somewhat pejorative way in my lectures. I do so not to stir up opposition to theology as such but to challenge students to think carefully about theology's roots in our Western intellectual heritage. What I then mean by the term is the body of thought that results when intellectuals who have given their hearts to the philosophical tradition get hold of some ideas in the Bible and try to regularize and systematize them, following out the consequences of the principle of continuity.

To penetrate further into the ramifications of the principle of continuity, we need to look briefly at two other philosophers -- Descartes and Kant. The theme in the philosophical development that took place in the era almost two centuries long which philosophers speak of as the "modern period" (Descartes was born in 1596, and Kant died in 1804), is the growing centrality of the subject or knower. The seeds of what emerged as transcendental philosophy in Kant were clearly present Descartes' famous turn to the subject. In other words, what Descartes had begun, Kant brought to a remarkable conclusion.

In terms of my analysis, we could say that the principle of continuity gets transcendental standing through the work which Kant capped off. All of knowledge forms a system; it is of one piece. Descartes, of course, was fully committed to this thesis, as his famous comparison of our knowledge to a tree indicates. He writes: "Thus philosophy as a whole is like a tree whose roots are metaphysics, whose trunk is physics, and whose branches, which issue from this trunk, are all the other sciences." [NOTE 4] Kant, bringing this

tradition to a conclusion in the conception of science sketched out in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, even inaugurates another tradition in his moral philosophy and philosophy of religion, when he pushes all "religious knowledge" into the category of belief. But that later development in Kantian philosophy, interesting as it is in itself, will not concern me at this juncture.

Important for our purposes is the Kantian resolution of the Cartesian split between transcendental priority and ontological priority. For Descartes the human subject came first in the order of knowing: the *Meditations* start with the knowing subject and reach God further down the line via an ontological argument. Yet, in and through all of this, Descartes still held to an essentially orthodox account of God and creation: ontologically speaking, God comes first, and all of created reality is dependent upon him moment by moment. In Kant, of course, this separation is overcome, and the Cartesian ontology in which all things depend on God vanishes. Human knowledge is at this point thoroughly representational (in brief: contained in, and limited to, consciousness). And Kant says of it: "It must be possible for the 'I think' to accompany all my representations" [NOTE 5]

Because pretentious transcendental language has largely fallen away in twentieth-century philosophy (although it is still to be found in Husserl and even in Heidegger), all of this might seem far-fetched. I would maintain, however, that the idea of relating all knowledge to the human subject as the condition and principle for its unity and organization is still very much with us. William James, in particular, was keenly aware that a secularized culture had to replace God, as the traditional absolute knower, with a human all-knower, or perhaps a community of knowers. He observes that empiricism, by which he means the thinking that has largely displaced the idealistic metaphysics that felt it could still appeal to "the Absolute,"

... is satisfied with the type of noetic unity that is humanly familiar. Everything gets known by *some* knower along with something else; but the knowers may in the end be irreducibly many, and the greatest knower of them all may not yet know the whole of everything, or even know what he does know at one single stroke: -- he may be liable to forget. [NOTE 6]

The philosophical suggestions of James have not carried the day in our time: the amount of discontinuity in our knowledge which he was prepared to accept is simply too much for many of our contemporaries to swallow. They are determined that all knowledge must somehow be understood as my knowledge, and that therefore it must all be of a single piece. Hence, if we are to have a doctrine of beginnings, of origins, it must be related to me and my concerns in the present; it must be *constituted* (to use a high-flown but still relevant term drawn from the phenomenological tradition) by contemporary practical interests. It cannot be a sheer given that comes to me as an absolute novelty -- an opaque "that" as opposed to a transparent "why," to hark back to the terminology of Shestov. Ontology in the old-fashioned sense of ascertaining and listing what is there (including man's place in the larger web of existence) is hardly in evidence any longer among philosophers.

III

That some relation to the subject who knows and acts in the present is constitutive for human awareness and consciousness can perhaps be demonstrated most easily in philosophy of history (which is my own area of academic specialization). Understanding, the mode of knowledge appropriate to the historical world and, more broadly, to social and cultural questions, turns out on close inspection to have a backward-looking or retrospective character in that it constructs -- or even continuously reconstructs -- the past from the standpoint of the present and its existential needs and interests. The retrospective character of understanding was clearly grasped by the German philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), who maintained: "One would first have to await the end of history in order to possess all the material necessary to determine its meaning." [NOTE 7]

To make such an admission about the character of historical consciousness is not to yield to modern philosophy and its transcendental orientation but to recognize the essential structure of historical thought. (It is important to set off historical thought from other modes of knowledge, of which I am convinced there are many). The awareness that historical thought has a retrospective character and is always shaped by the interests and existential needs of the present has the effect of relativizing our historical certainties. It shows us that one cannot simply look into the past, so to speak, in order to see and register what's there, the way a photographic plate is thought to record (without subjective or artistic input) what it finds before itself. The past, in any case, is not just there to be inspected. As a Christian philosopher of history, I am convinced that a recognition of the subject-centeredness of historical awareness can help us see limits in human knowledge more broadly. The theme of my own work in this area is that there are sources of correction of which the historical knower must avail himself if he is not to be misled constantly. Thus a kind of objectivity is still possible, I believe. What is needed, in short, is what some thinkers have called a "critique" (critical investigation of character and limits) of "historical reason" (I would prefer to call it historical consciousness).

A proper awareness of retrospectivity as a constitutive principle in much human knowledge can help us especially, I am convinced, in coming to grips with the body of literature we call evolutionism. I believe that evolutionism is best understood as a narrative that leads to the hero or protagonist, namely, man as we know him in our time. What I find amusing about such writing is that the same scientists who make such an effort to eliminate all purposiveness and teleology from scientific writing allow it to dominate when the evolutionistic narrative is constructed. All the entities -- or should I say characters? -- we encounter along the way seem to have their sights set on the perfections of twentieth-century homo sapiens. The things they do are necessary in order that we might one day walk on the stage of human history. We are treated to the sight of endless organisms and creatures, seemingly lacking in intelligence, determined to pass on their "genes." Oddly enough, man himself didn't know what genes were until comparatively recently; yet those organisms living millions of years ago were positively eager to pass on their genes and play their role in the glorious process of evolution that led up to us.

What is evolutionism, then? A reconstruction of the distant past on the basis of "facts" (remember that the alleged facts are really only bits of non-organic matter existing in the present) and materials within a speculative narrative framework. It has nothing to do with science in any strict and worthy sense of the term. The more one studies literature -- especially the branch that concerns itself with the constitutive principles of narration -- the more one comes to recognize evolutionism for what it really is, namely, the myth which many people in our society choose to live by. Creationists are right to challenge its official endorsement in the curricula of public schools.

IV

After this somewhat lengthy excursus into philosophical questions, I come at last not to theology but to what I would more modestly call advice to theology and theologians. By this point the main thrust of my advice should be obvious: stay away from the great systematization and regularization of human knowledge. I do not believe that theology should apply for permission to be included as part of the "encyclopedia of the philosophical sciences."

Some might wish to argue that my advice to theology sins against the ideal of integrating faith and learning, an ideal and goal that has virtually official status by now in some of our Reformed colleges. Shouldn't there be a highway leading from theology to physics and biology, let us say, and another parallel road leading back, like a modern freeway?

My conviction is that the road that gets one from theology to biology should not be too broad and inviting. I am inclined instead to view the various disciplines and intellectual traditions that are represented in the curriculum of a Christian college as properly *competing* with one another to some extent, and thereby also relativizing one another. Even the staunchest proponents of the integration of faith and learning know that a science student glued to his microscope for too long can benefit from some exposure to art and poetry. Charles Darwin himself complained about losing his taste for poetry in later years and speculated that it might have been due to too much concentration on scientific work:

... formerly Pictures gave me considerable, and music very great delight. But now for many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry; I have tried lately to read Shakespeare and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me. I have also almost lost any taste for pictures or music My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of fact, but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone, on which the higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive. [NOTE 8]

The problem that arose in Darwin's life is the reason why our colleges take a liberal arts approach and even build in requirements that will keep students from getting too narrow and specialized. I believe a little competition (as in FDR's White House) can be healthy.

It might even lead some disciplines or sub-disciplines currently represented in our colleges into a well-deserved decline.

I recognize that the answer I have given to the question I raised above is somewhat sketchy: a fuller answer is available in my book *Public Knowledge and Christian Education*, [NOTE 9] which focuses especially on the challenge of science in our Christian institutions. For this context I will say, in brief, that I propose to interpret the ideal of the integration of faith and learning in a non-Hegelian manner. (It should be noted, by the way, that there is a good deal of organicistic idealism in our current rhetoric about Christian higher education; think of Abraham Kuyper's heavy use of "organic" as contrasted with "mechanical.")

Moreover, as regards the ideal of integrating faith and learning, please note that I have not said a word against it. "Learning is for serving" is the motto of Redeemer College, and that's essentially what I take the integration of faith and learning to be all about. We learn physics not to apply it in theology or to help us understand theology better but to serve God more effectively. Thus we could say: "Physics is for serving" -- not "Physics is for theology." And, conversely, when we study theology, it is not necessarily in the expectation that it will make better physicists out of us.

V

My second piece of advice to theology and theologians is embodied in my title: stress that creation involves novelty, something unexpected, indigestible, unassimilable. I do not claim that this is the whole meaning of the doctrine of creation (I will make some comments later about the notion of *creatio ex nihilo*), and I do not suggest that this emphasis can or should be central in the way passages about creation are dealt with in sermons. Remember that I am talking specifically about theology.

Perhaps we can here regard the notion of novelty as a translation, into positive language, of what I earlier called discontinuity. Ortega is right, I believe, in maintaining that the Biblical notion of creation runs directly contrary to untutored human expectations about the nature of reality. Creation is too novel a notion ever to fit neatly inside our intellectual systems, and it stands so utterly outside human experience that it cannot be regarded as part of our history or be properly woven into stories that have people as their protagonists.

My third piece of advice is that if you are sympathetic to what I have said so far, you cannot properly regard creation -- as the Bible presents it -- as a story. (I would argue instead that it is the backdrop to every story, that it sets the stage.) This may strike you as a strange claim because we have grown up with story Bibles that begin with "the creation story." But if it is genuinely a story, who is the protagonist? God, you answer. Perhaps so, but can we truly make God the protagonist? When God gets down to our level, doesn't he do so by incarnating himself as Jesus? Reread some of the accounts in the story Bibles. Do they really have a story-like character?

We also like to insist that the creation story is literally true. (We then mean that it is not to be interpreted as an allegory, as Augustine was inclined to do.) I agree that it is no allegory, but I don't know quite how the category of literalness (which I understand to mean "in terms of ordinary experience") can apply here. It seems to me that the creation account (I prefer not to call it a story) is not to be understood literally at all. It is to be confessed and embraced while being understood only in a fragmentary way, for it transcends human comprehension.

My next piece of advice to theologians will be found less controversial, I'm sure. We should avoid any naturalizing of the creation account. The naturalizing approach (which plays into the hands of theological liberals who are determined, in accordance with the principle of continuity, to integrate theology, along with its doctrine of creation, into the larger body of knowledge that I have been calling the encyclopedia of the philosophical sciences) focuses on creation as a process and asks how it took place. Whereas I would answer that we don't know and have no way of finding out, the naturalizers insist that creation must be equivalent to the grand process that some scientists refer to as evolution. And so we posit a kind of cosmic evolution (which extends beyond the organic domain) and decree that the entire process (which in the context of theology we then call *theistic* evolution) is the work of God.

I will not take up any time reviewing the usual objections to theistic evolution. Instead I will proceed directly to what I find so interesting about it, namely, that it opens up the work of God to scientific scrutiny. "God moves in a mysterious way / His wonders to perform," we often sing (*Psalter Hymnal* # 461, 1957 edition). I would invite attention especially for the last stanza:

Blind unbelief is sure to err,
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own Interpreter,
And He will make it plain.

We confess the mystery in worship and song, but when we undertake academic work we seem to think that the mystery needs to be dispelled -- and can be dispelled. Thus I suggest that if we manage to resist the integration of physics and biology with theology, we will have an easier time resisting the blandishments of theistic evolution.

VI

I am now in a position to comment on the famous Latin phrase that so many of us associate with the doctrine of creation -- *creatio ex nihilo*. It is true that the phrase and notion do not get referred to directly in the Bible, although there is a proof text of sorts in the Apocrypha: "I beseech you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed. Thus also mankind comes into being" (II Maccabees 7:28). The phrase is not in the Bible because the notion is essentially a refined piece of theological abstraction.

I have chosen to deal with this notion last rather than first because my lecture has been essentially a roundabout -- and perhaps somewhat novel (I had to get that word in there) -- way of explicating what is meant by this term. To say that God created the world out of nothing is to affirm that the process is utterly unlike anything we know. Theology abounds in comparisons, analogies, and metaphors. We invent them freely -- often too freely -- to apply to the work of God, but *creatio ex nihilo* cuts certain of them off at the root.

One of our favorite analogies is building. A person in the building business can usually figure out, in inspecting a new building, what the major steps were in getting it up. He can see what sort of equipment was involved, in what order the various tradesmen had to do their work, and so forth. But there is no builder able to survey the handiwork of God and say: "Now I see how he did it. I can tell where he got his building supplies and what the major steps in the project were." God is the master builder who leaves no scaffolding behind. There is nothing in the creation -- contrary to the theistic evolutionists -- that can tell us how it all came to be out of nothing. In fact, the *ex nihilo* phrase can almost be viewed as piece of satire. We tend to be very conscious of what things are made of. So when we ask how God made the world and what materials he used, the answer comes back, almost as a rebuke: Out of nothing.

Also very important in this notion is its simplicity. Christian theology is intended to be lived, preached, confessed; therefore it must not be too complex. The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is highly abstract, and yet very simple. Even a child can say it, and can probably understand it about as much as any of us here have understood it. The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* cuts off, at the very root, any and all natural-theology discussions of how God does what he does in making the world. At the simplest level it says to us: "All you have to do is believe."

VII

A central notion in my discussion so far is that of "naturalizing": I have argued that the acts of God in creation must not be naturalized, brought into the scope of human investigation and inquiry, and reduced by being understood. This notion also has application in other areas of theology. Indeed, it can help us understand what theology is and why it cannot be integrated with psychology, for example, to the same extent that sociology can. (I trust you realize by now that I do not maintain that two such disciplines as psychology and sociology should not build roads back and forth and seek a high degree of interrelation; my concern here is simply to protect the independence and integrity of theology.)

Another major topic we deal with in theology is faith. The creeds tell us that faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit. The Heidelberg Catechism asks simply: Whence comes this faith? The answer: "From the Holy Spirit" (Lord's Day 25). In the Canons of Dort we read that "... the secret recesses of the heart are unknown to us" (Article 15 of Chapter 3-4). The Belgic Confession takes up this theme in connection with the sacraments. Perhaps it has never occurred to you to ask whether the operation of God's Spirit through the sacraments

is subject to scientific scrutiny. The Belgic Confession is quite definite on this point, speaking of the work of the Spirit as an "inward and invisible thing" (Article 33), and of "invisible grace" as accompanying the part of the sacrament that is visible (i.e. the water - see Article 34). In Article 35, which deals with the Lord's Supper, we read about a twofold life, one "temporal" and the other "spiritual," and we are informed that the latter "is not common, but is peculiar to God's elect." When our Lord works in our hearts through the sacraments, "... the manner surpasses our understanding and cannot be comprehended by us, as the operations of the Holy Spirit are hidden and incomprehensible." Thus it might seem an interesting project to investigate faith from the standpoint of modern psychology, but our creeds are not at all hospitable to such an enterprise. In this sector of theology, too, we must be on guard against naturalizing, against the effort to integrate Christian credal teaching into some larger encyclopedic body of philosophical knowledge.

Now, there is much theological and psychological literature that tries to argue that such an enterprise is both possible and necessary. Faith, for such thinkers, is part of our psychical make-up. The generation and growth of faith can be studied, and in the literature on religious education we see all sorts of strategies whereby these things can be facilitated. I will refer only to the most prominent of the thinkers: James Fowler, the author of such works as *Stages of Faith* and *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, who, of course, owes a good deal to the inspiration of Lawrence Kohlberg.

Fowler both interests and concerns me, not just because of the universalism that underlies his work as its real theological meaning, but even more because of his alluring suggestion that the life of faith and grace and sacrament can all come within the scope of science. The rise of interest in faith development (all such talk goes back to Fowler and Kohlberg) is a major dangerous trend in the Christian Reformed Church today, although it is not normally recognized as such. The novelty theme needs to be used here as well, to stress the utter incomprehensibility and indispensability of what the Holy Spirit does.

Revelation and Novelty

by Theodore Plantinga

I

In dealing with revelation I will again begin by affirming that my remarks have the character of prolegomena, that is, that they are comments one makes before, in advance. Hence my treatment of the theme of revelation will be philosophical, conceptual, theoretical, which is to say that I will not be dealing with the actual *content* of revelation, except perhaps on an incidental basis.

I have a long-standing interest in the concept of revelation, but I must confess, to my disappointment, that this interest is not often fed by new and innovative insights or ideas.

Since I am always on the lookout for treatments of the theme of revelation, I regularly look at publications that claim to deal with it. Most of them, it turns out, focus on the *content* of revelation -- and ignore the conceptual issues with which I struggle, the issues on which I am constantly in search of guidance.

The philosophical tradition -- taken as a whole -- is hostile to the notions of both creation and revelation. Why this attitude in the case of revelation? The answer, I believe, is quite simple: it is the desire in the heart of sinful man for what we might call epistemological autonomy. Just as a toddler wants to walk without holding on to his mother's hand, and therefore winds up falling from time to time, man wants to go it on his own when it comes to orienting himself in this world. Lev Shestov argues that the first man wished "to know," not "to believe," and adds that the first man, like many a philosopher after him, was vexed by the notion of faith, regarding it as "a kind of diminution, an injury to his human dignity." [NOTE 10]

We can illustrate this tendency from the history of philosophy. Let us begin with Plato. His insistence that the human soul, by virtue of a prior existence in the domain or general vicinity of the Forms, was equipped to know, judge, and evaluate particulars by measuring them against the Forms as yardstick, really amounts to the insistence that man is on his own when it comes to knowledge-gathering. Man is cognitively equipped when he comes into this world: that's why learning can be called recollection. [NOTE 11]

When we turn to Descartes, who is generally thought to be the father of modern philosophy, we see that the main theme in his philosophy -- especially when we think in terms of how it was received and transmitted to succeeding generations -- is the ability of the human mind to attain truth on its own, provided it follows a carefully prescribed method; hence he laid down "rules for the direction of the mind" and wrote a discourse "on the method of rightly conducting the reason and seeking for truth in the sciences." When we have "clear and distinct" ideas, we can be sure that they correspond to reality. Even God's existence is proven by such a route. In the case of the British empiricist tradition (note that an exception should be made for Berkeley), man is again epistemologically autonomous. Everything in the intellect derives from the senses -- this is the main thesis defended by Locke and Hume. Thus, we need no knowledge input from without. And if there is to be revelation of some sort -- this is Locke's position, whereas Hume did not believe in revelation at all -- it must be "reasonable." When we move on to Hegel, we see the thesis of man's independence asserted again, although the gathering of knowledge or wisdom or insight now becomes a collective human project, and a project from which a sort of God (conceived of in pantheist terms) is not excluded. Still, God's participation is not as revealer: knowledge still wells up from within.

Now, not every philosopher has wanted to exclude God utterly from the human process of gaining knowledge. There have been a number of thinkers in the Christian Platonist tradition who have transferred Plato's Forms to the mind of God and then developed some version of an illuminationist or divine participation epistemology. In such a scheme, the human knower ascends to or draws on the mind of God whenever he gains or develops knowledge. One such thinker is Nicolas Malebranche, who, in the words of James Collins, "... pushed to the extreme the rationalist policy of making God serve as the

underpinning for an epistemology." Malebranche, of course, is also the thinker who makes God the cause of all events, both mental and physical. Collins writes:

We have a direct vision of the divine essence, if not in its absolute nature, then at least to the extent that it is sharable by other things. Hence we see the same exemplar ideas according to which God creates the finite world. Since God cannot produce a contradiction, our vision of the ideal essences and eternal truths provides an unshakable mooring for the sciences.

[NOTE 12]

Such thinking stands at the opposite extreme from the tendency pointed out by Shestov, but it is subject to criticism in the form of a difficult question. Those who make God the ultimate author or cause of all deeds (as Malebranche does), have to answer the question whether God is the author of evil. In other words, what doctrine of sin and evil is then left? And those who resort to an illuminationist or divine participation epistemology must answer the question whether God is the source of error and illusion. In other words, we have to take account philosophically of both sin (wrong action) and error (wrong thought). And a Christian Platonist scheme will not help us here.

If we wax eloquent about the glories of knowledge and proclaim that knowledge cannot be understood and explained unless we pull God into the picture, shouldn't we also wax eloquent about other marvelous processes, such as nutrition? We ingest and digest food, extract nourishment from it, and then expel what we don't need or can't use. Should we develop a divine participation theory of nutrition? Such a notion probably strikes you as absurd. Why? Well, one reason is that you regard nutrition as an extremely earthly -- or perhaps I should say earthy -- process. We share nutrition with the animals: they also eat, process food, and excrete what they don't or can't use. Would animals then have to be included in a divine participation theory of nutrition?

My answer is that no such fancy theology is needed in a Christian high school when we take up nutrition: we can explain it in terms of the organs God has created for human beings and animals to use. But then I would go on to ask: what about animal knowledge, animal cognition of reality? Don't we share cognition with the animals? Don't animals possess eyes, ears and noses? Do Christian Platonists also have squirrels ascending to the mind of God to discover whether there are any acorns around to eat or store for winter? Their answer is no, and the reason they can give such an answer is that they tend to conceive of man as an immaterial soul: the soul (think of Plato's "unaided intellect") apprehends the "pure and unadulterated object." [NOTE 13] Thus the similarities between human and animal knowing do not even come up for discussion.

What I wish to suggest is that we, as human beings, gain much knowledge in a manner similar to that used by animals. We use our eyes to look for something to eat, and also to stay away from our enemies. And when we do so, we are functioning as God intended. Over against Christian Platonism, I would stress that God gave us the senses for our use, and that, as good gifts of God, we may rely on them. God expects us to use those senses in all kinds of ways day by day (which is why it is so serious to undergo the loss of one

of the senses, such as sight or hearing). He does not promise to give us all the information we need by means of revelation.

My thesis, then, is that we must not equate revelation with the entire domain of human knowledge and experience. Revelation is extremely important -- but it is not everything, cognitively speaking. In fact, if revelation were indeed "everything," it would also, in a significant sense, be nothing. And this tendency, namely, to make revelation both everything and nothing, is the error of the liberal tradition within Christianity.

II

In "Creation and Novelty," I talked about the danger of taming, naturalizing and assimilating the doctrine of creation. I now want to point to the same danger as it manifests itself in connection with the doctrine of revelation. Exactly such a tendency rears its head in liberal Christian theology, for example, the work of Schleiermacher, who wrote:

What is "revelation"? Every new and original communication of the universe and its inmost life to men is a revelation. Thus every moment ... can be seen to be revelatory, if you are properly conscious of its special character. [NOTE 14]

What happens in Schleiermacher's thought is that no proper separation is made between revelation and human responses to revelation. However important the latter i.e. human responses, may be and however eagerly we look for them, we make a cardinal error if we equate them with the revelation itself. In the background, again, is the principle of continuity, which plays such a fundamental role in liberal thought, for this principle encourages us to blend revelation and response.

I wish to argue against this theological tendency on some formal or non-theological grounds, that is to say, on philosophical grounds. If everything -- or virtually everything -- is revelation, actually or perhaps only potentially, then nothing is. Then revelation ceases to be a central category in our thought, just as if everything is miracle (as it is, again, for Schleiermacher), then nothing is miracle.

Writers often use the device of highlighting key words, or perhaps phrases, or even entire sentences, by underlining them or using italic type. Some writers need to be restrained by editors: they are told that highlighting can easily be overdone. If we use italics too freely, they lose their effect. To highlight everything -- I can well imagine that everything in a certain writing might seem important to its author -- we in effect highlight nothing. We could easily set an entire book in italic type, but what good would that do? The irritation many people feel with red-letter Bibles comes about in part for similar reasons. At first it seems like a good idea to highlight and set off the actual words of Jesus. But then it turns out that entire pages of some of the gospels have to be composed of red print (which is less readable than black print). The intended effect of the highlighting is lost.

We must learn to think of revelation as highlight. If all human discourse were revelation, we wouldn't know how to prepare our ears and hearts to listen to the Lord. And if everyone were an incarnation of God -- which is more or less what some religious traditions teach -- we wouldn't be able to neglect kitchen tasks to sit at the feet of the Master (as Mary did, recognizing that there is plenty of time for doing dishes later). The realization that Jesus -- and no one else -- is the incarnate Messiah is what gives meaning to the much misunderstood statement "The poor you always have with you" (John 12:8). Therefore we must stay away from any totalizing view of revelation.

III

Another point of a non-theological nature needs to be made here, and it concerns the capacity of human beings to receive and absorb revelation -- or any other communication, for that matter. In information theory one hears talk about redundancy, which means, roughly, repetition. When we are told something we already know, it has no information value for us. Moreover, it hinders the reception of genuine information, as we know from experience. Let me give you a couple of examples.

My favorite National Football League team is the Minnesota Vikings. If I listen to a radio or TV sports report from Buffalo (the nearest major American city) to find out how the Vikings fared, their game usually does not lead the parade of scores, for the folks in Buffalo want to hear about the Bills' game. Often many other scores are reported first, perhaps with film clips from the games. Thus I may have to listen for several minutes before hearing about the Vikings' game. What happens, often, is that I miss the Vikings' score altogether, for while other matters are being discussed my mind tends to wander. I may tune in again when the Vikings are mentioned, but sometimes I am not alert enough. The result is that I have to go out and buy a newspaper to get the information I want.

I have the same problem with weather reports. The CBC radio station I listen to loves to give the weather for all sectors of Ontario, and so I have to wait till my own part of the province is mentioned. By that time my attention may have drifted to something else, and I miss it. (How I wish I had a dollar for every time this has happened to me!) I dare say that you would have the same problem. Suppose, when you phoned directory assistance asking for a certain telephone number, the system gave you much more than you asked for -- let's say all the telephone numbers on the page on which the number you are seeking appears. I suspect that when the voice on the phone read to you the number that you had actually asked for, you might not be paying attention and thus miss it.

Scientists tell us that some animals perceive only difference; that is to say, they are unable to perceive a mass of solid color. And some can only be said to perceive when there is movement. Hence if a predator stands completely still, they literally don't see or notice him. This shows us again that focus is a major factor in perception generally, and must be borne in mind when we talk about revelation and the mode in which God addresses us and makes contact with us.

One of the points that must be stressed about revelation, then, is that it has focus and comes to us as addressed. To draw an analogy from contemporary life, revelation is much more like a first-class letter than it is like junk mail. It is not an almanac listing all sorts of things we don't care to know about, e.g. the weather in faraway places; rather, it speaks to our need, our calling, our situation. In that regard it always includes an element of novelty.

IV

At this point I can pause and already sum up some conclusions. Revelation is only meaningful if it is not continuous with human knowledge and experience, if it is not redundant, if it brings us something relevant to our life today, our calling, our needs. At its very center, of course, revelation is gospel, good news. And it is not just yesterday's news, which we cast aside like yesterday's newspaper, deeming it of little relevance to our situation today. The fact that the gospel continues to meet with opposition in our own hearts ought to tell us something. We all wish to make our own way, and so we tend to deny our continuing sinfulness. We need to be told day by day that we cannot make it on our own and be assured that God has promised to be with us to renew us and enable us to carry out the task he has assigned us.

The fact that revelation is so often rejected ought to be clue to its real character. The offense which the gospel encounters everywhere -- and we must make no exception for our own hearts -- should indicate clearly enough that its content, its message, is nothing trivial that we can easily assimilate to our day-by-day round of concerns.

I now propose to draw some implications of this understanding of revelation. The first concerns Scripture -- or rather, the story line in Scripture, which we often call Biblical history. Whereas the story line overlaps with general history or world history, and especially the history of the ancient near east, it can never be assimilated to it but will always stand apart as an indigestible element that causes a degree of perplexity.

One way to express this point is to say that Scripture is a source -- or perhaps a set of sources -- so different in nature from other sources that we do not know how to include it among the others. As the Christian historian works with Biblical givens, all the while honoring the principle of Biblical authority, he find a certain unevenness creeping into his work. Omri, for example, is dealt with only in passing in the Bible: his son Ahab is the focus of much more attention. Yet in general history Omri looms much larger. How could one reconcile such disparities?

My answer, of course, is that no serious effort should be made to reconcile them. The integration of Bible with history which is often attempted in Christian high schools is a good idea only up to a point; if carried through consistently it would cost us a great deal. For we must study both Omri, for his overall significance, and Ahab, for his special role in a history designated by God as part of his revelation.

I would even apply this approach to the contentious question of the resurrection of Jesus. That our Lord died on the cross is not the subject of much dispute; we could refer to it as a fact. (I use the term fact here for whatever one can appeal to in an argument without running the risk of being contradicted. Thus it is now a fact that President Kennedy was a womanizer; it was not a fact back in 1970, seven years after his death.) Jesus' resurrection is not a fact in the same way. Many people deny it. Some affirm it, but in a peculiar way that does not satisfy Christian orthodoxy. And the rest of us maintain that he arose bodily and eventually ascended into heaven. But these events are not part of general history in quite the same way as his death. Of course the miracles that accompanied the crucifixion are not an undisputed part of general history either.

Some of you might find this a peculiar contention on my part. Am I somehow denying the resurrection? Not at all. Rather, I am arguing that historical awareness of the past is something shared, and that events that are utterly mysterious and/or miraculous cannot easily be assimilated to it. History is full of undigested lumps: the resurrection is one of them. (Historians generally ignore them, or, if they are too prominent to be ignored, deny them.) I cannot explain the resurrection or render it easy to swallow, but I most certainly believe it, and I base my life on it.

V

The next conclusion is somewhat more obvious: the expanded doctrine of general revelation with which many people in Reformed circles have long operated must be scrapped. The basis for this expanded doctrine, which is closely linked with misunderstandings of common grace, is the "God wrote two books" thesis. Proponents of this thesis are referring, of course, not to the Old and New Testaments but to the Bible and nature. And nature, when looked at carefully, turns out to include history and culture. God makes himself known in creation -- that's the original thesis. But when general-revelation thinkers are done talking, it turns out that he also makes himself known via the puzzling art works in your local museum of *avant-garde* art.

To deny this doctrine -- or, to be more precise, a mistaken version of the doctrine -- I will first make an affirmation, namely, that God created the world good, as the book of Genesis emphasizes. And the believer can see in that goodness of creation a reflection of the goodness of God himself. But we no longer live in the Garden of Eden. This is so obvious that I am almost embarrassed to repeat it here; yet it is of decisive significance for our question today. Does the Windemere Basin, a body of water near my home, which is famous for the toxic chemicals it contains, also manifest God's goodness to us? Or can it better be regarded as a reminder of man's greed and shortsightedness?

I am quite willing to admit, then, that the Garden of Eden and the original creation can be viewed in faith as a manifestation of God's goodness, and also that vast stretches of unspoiled nature today lead the believer to think about God as Creator. The issue must be joined when it comes time to assess culture: do the wonders of modern secular art and culture tell us about God? I see no reason to affirm that they do, although they certainly testify eloquently as to who man is. And if history does tell us something about God, the

lesson is malleable: what conclusion you draw will depend on what convictions you bring to your study of history. When I contemplate the destruction involved in the Battle of Berlin in 1945, I cannot help but think of God as the one who reveals himself as judge of all the earth: the one who topples Babylonian and Assyrian tyrants from their thrones has also dealt with Hitler. But such conclusions do not spring directly from the battle itself; rather, they result from examining the battle in the light of the Bible.

What, then, is the positive content of the doctrine of general revelation? The doctrine is usually our response to texts in Scripture that speak of nature praising God: "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork" (Psalm 19:1). Why not read such texts as they are written? Why not affirm, with Annie Dillard and the Gospel according to Luke (see 19:40) that even stones can speak and shout the praises of God? What we do instead is to affirm that dead nature -- why does nature have to be dead, by the way? -- leads human beings to draw certain conclusions and make certain affirmations.

The significant element in the doctrine of general revelation is the affirmation made by Paul in Romans 1: the invisible things of God have been made manifest so that mankind might be without excuse. How is one to read this? I for my part do not interpret it on an individual level; in other words, I do not take it to mean that every human being that has ever lived has seen enough of nature to be able to conclude that God holds man responsible for his sin. (Many human beings never develop enough mental capacity to engage in such reasoning.) I read it instead in collective historical terms. The line of unbelief, cut off from revelation, that is, from God's speaking, which is always addressed to his people, possesses enough collective recollection of his revelation, which is mediated by tradition, that it is able to see the majesty and power of nature as a reminder that there is some sort of judge over all of us. And in virtue of that reminder -- in a time before the gospel went out to all the nations of the earth -- they are responsible and, in Paul's phrase, without excuse. Today, if people have not heard, we as believers entrusted with the great commission, are at fault.

Defenders of general revelation in the broader sense which I have been criticizing need to take account of the criticisms of the Scottish philosopher David Hume. [NOTE 15] In his attack on the teleological or design argument for God's existence, Hume was, in a curious and unintended way, helping theology get back on track. His age was much preoccupied with "evidences" and the "reasonableness of Christianity." It seemed to many people that theology somehow had to draw on God's handiwork in nature as part of its source material. Hume raised objections about the inferences that were too glibly drawn and maintained that the omnipotent God of the Scriptures was not a likely candidate for having created the world as we know it. He suggested that if we had to infer a maker, we should opt for a young, inexperienced deity, or perhaps even a bungler.

Was Hume right? No, but I would affirm that Hume was alerting us to the ravages of sin - - as they affect both history and nature. I have referred already to the blight of pollution. Let's now turn to the daily newspaper as a record of the deeds of men. There we read stories of greed, slaughter, bungling, corruption -- in short, sin of every kind. Does God

really make himself known in and through such deeds of men? Do we find out what God is like by reading the biographies of Hitler and Stalin? (Remember that although Hitler was toppled from power, Stalin died in bed.) When people starve to death in various countries around the world today, do their spindly legs and bloated stomachs somehow tell us what God is like? Is a direct inference possible from our suffering world to the character of God? Does our ravaged world manifest the image and likeness of God?

A better argument would be that although we as human beings are supposed to manifest God's image, we often keep it hidden. For those who wish to see the Father, of course, Scripture has a straightforward answer. "Philip said to him, 'Lord show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied.' Jesus said to him, 'Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father ...'" (John 14:8-9). And so we need to remind ourselves and each other that it pleased God to make himself known to us through Jesus Christ, the Son who is the spitting image of the Father. And it was not any physical magnificence on our Lord's part that rendered the Father visible either; indeed, according to Isaiah 53 he was nothing to look at, physically speaking. And that's part of the surprise that runs through Scripture. Just as David was an unlikely candidate for the role of God's chosen one, so also Jesus of Nazareth. We see again that God is very specific and focused in his revelation. He does not reveal himself generally through strong males and beautiful females (have you ever watched the Miss America pageant with the broad understanding of general revelation in your mind as justification?); rather, he reveals himself focally through his chosen one -- our Lord Jesus Christ.

VI

The misunderstanding of general revelation is theologically dangerous and unhealthy because it serves to draw attention away from the actual revelation -- in Scripture and in Christ. If revelation is potentially available to us everywhere in nature and history and culture, there is no need to be preoccupied with the Bible. What pastor has not heard arguments to the effect that on a beautiful summer Sunday God can be encountered in nature just as well as in church?

Such a misunderstanding is strengthened especially by the attitude many Reformed people take toward the enterprise of science, by which I mean natural science. We are involved in natural science in a big way, for we operate Christian liberal arts colleges in which science is taught. Thus we have developed a rationale for studying science which relies heavily on a mistaken conception of general revelation. Our God is a God of order, we maintain, and by investigating orderly processes in physics, chemistry and biology we come to know him better. Thus science really turns out to be theology in that it yields knowledge of God. What this comes to in practice is that not just nature but also our account of nature in the form of scientific writings comes to have revelational status.

This tendency to view science itself as a revelation from God is a factor in the debate currently underway in our circles concerning *The Fourth Day*, a recent book Prof. Howard Van Till of Calvin College. [NOTE 16] For example, in a letter published in *Calvinist Contact* on January 23, 1987, James Taylor argues: "If God created the earth,

then it too is God's Word to us." Robert Vander Vennen, in a later issue, follows up by observing:

Whenever Christian people disagree among themselves about aspects of science, what they are disagreeing about is not science but how to interpret the Bible. What is really at stake is how to interpret the Bible. In recent discussions of Van Till's book *The Fourth Day* the focus too is on interpreting the first two chapters of Genesis.

To get away from such thinking, we need a clear understanding of what science does -- and does not -- involve. I would maintain that science today, with its operational definitions and its countless models, can be most fruitfully understood as a series of techniques, discourses and practices that aim at the material transformation of reality for the betterment of mankind. Does science, then, tell us the way reality is? That some scientists aspire to do so cannot be denied, but then, so do lots of other people, including poets and shamans. The issue, in philosophical terms, is whether an ontological interpretation can and should be given for all scientific operations. And I would answer that question with a simple no. Scientists are welcome to talk about neutrinos and other curious sub-atomic particles, for example, but I do not feel obliged to believe that such particles actually exist, any more than I believe that the Gross National Product exists. Many scientific disciplines make heavy use of abstractions and of reifications that correspond to nothing concrete in reality or human experience. The use of terms that name models can best be understood as a manner of speaking.

VII

Part of our response to the Van Till challenge is to articulate what we believe concerning origins and the age of the earth. In this regard I have five points to make. Naturally, I do not claim that all of them are -- or should be -- part of the creed we hold in common as Christians

First of all, the Christian answer to the question of origins in its strongest sense is the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. We offer no account, of course, of God's origin. *Creatio ex nihilo* means that the universe is not eternal. I believe that this doctrine is best construed as a denial of various other possibilities that have been raised.

A second, more concrete area of inquiry is the age of the earth: is it relatively old or relatively young? It seems to me that we must maintain that it is a young earth. How young? Here there is some room for debate; I surely would not argue for Bishop Ussher's chronology.

The third area for comment is the proper exegesis of the first eleven chapter of Genesis. Here there is much room for constructive work on the part of conservative Christians. To maintain that these chapters must be taken "literally" (which to me means in terms of everyday experience) will not get us very far; what we really mean to say is that they must be taken seriously. And what this means, in turn, is that they must be understood as

part of the gospel message, in a way that will render them suitable material for preaching. We do deal somewhat with Noah in sermons, but we tend to neglect the rest of what we find in Genesis 4 through 10.

The fourth area of comment is the doctrine of the fall into sin, which must be taught as historical. By calling it historical, I mean to say that the fall is something that actually happened within time (unlike the creation itself, which inaugurated time) and that it has consequences for all subsequent human history. It is especially the radical consequences of the fall into sin that need to be stressed when we talk about origins. Where did we come from? It is not enough to say that we come from God, who looked upon his handiwork and declared that it was very good: we must add that we fell very deeply into sin, and that we have only slowly, through God's grace, been raised up again. In my own teaching I stress the consequences of the fall into sin as giving us a perspective on so-called prehistory

The fifth area of comment is the character of history as constructed, as communal remembrance. In other words, to tackle these questions we need a Christian philosophy of history, including especially an understanding of what historical awareness is and what factors go to make it up. Our young people must grasp the existential need for a myth to live by; without such an awareness they will never comprehend what evolutionism really is in our society, namely, the narrative of the myth of progress by which modern secular man tries to live. Our main story line is not one of continuous progress but rather creation by God, fall into sin with all of its consequences, and then redemption through Jesus Christ, with the fruits of that redemption already beginning to manifest themselves in human history here on earth.

Should all of these affirmations about origins become part of our creed, our body of official teaching? I don't believe so. I mentioned five points. The ones that have credal significance, in my judgment, are the first (*creatio ex nihilo*) and the fourth (the fall into sin and its radical consequences).

VIII

The final area of application for the conception of revelation I am proposing is the study of the world's religions. That such study is popular today and that it is pervaded by relativism and universalism is surely well known to all of you. How should we respond to this state of affairs? Should we stay away from such study? I don't believe so, for how could we ever square such a strategy with our commitment to missions?

As long as we are in the grip of the misunderstanding of general revelation and common grace according to which, to use the words of Ralph Stob, a former president of Calvin College, God "speaks to men in pagan nations through their noblest souls and greatest geniuses," we will not quickly find the way out. Rather, we will be inclined to suppose that we really have no choice but to become ever more liberal on this question. Stob also wrote: "It is God's grace applied through the operation of the Spirit which explains whatever was good and true in pagan antiquity." [NOTE 17] Classical civilization has

long been protected in our circles by the umbrella of common grace; today we see modern secular science seeking shelter there as well.

I would propose instead that we simply refuse to regard the world's major religious traditions -- however impressive they may be in cultural, artistic and intellectual terms -- as having anything to do with a self-manifestation on God's part outside of Christ and Scripture. We will then be in a position to study those traditions historically and culturally. And, closer to home, we can join the North American discussion about what we must do to make room in our society for increasing numbers of people whose cultural roots are not in Europe -- as our own are -- but in Asia.

All of this discussion and study can take place, I am convinced, without any surrender on the essential point of antithesis between the gospel and the religious traditions that oppose it. The notion of revelation as novelty, as providing man with surprising truths that he could not figure out on his own, will safeguard us from the temptation to declare that all religions eventually reach the same general conclusion. We must declare most emphatically that they do not. What Christianity affirms is that God, the Maker of heaven and earth, has manifested himself and made his will for mankind known through one person centrally -- Jesus of Nazareth. And so we must continue to think along the lines of the man in Zechariah's prophecy, who took hold of the robe of a Jew and declared, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you" (Zechariah 8:23).

We have been holding onto that robe for so long ourselves that some of us suppose that we really are Jews, and that our adherence to Christ is somehow part of our ethnicity. (I point, for example, to well-meant but misguided efforts undertaken by the Christian Reformed Church's Synodical Commission on Race Relations.) Therefore, I close with a reminder that our ancestors -- perhaps I should speak for myself here and limit myself to my own Frisian forebears -- worshipped other gods before the gospel took hold of them and called them away from pagan practices. The challenge that awaits us is not to somehow synthesize all cultures and ethnic groups but to point people the world over to Jerusalem. They will have to decide for themselves, as we have long been determining for ourselves, what baggage they can take with them on that journey to the city of David.

Notes

NOTE 1. *Man and Crisis*, tr. Mildred Adams, New York: W. W. Norton, 1962, pp. 164-5.

NOTE 2. *Athens and Jerusalem*, tr. Bernard Martin (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1966), see pp. 280-2.

NOTE 3. *The Impact of American Religious Liberalism* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 9.

NOTE 4. See *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, tr. E.S. Haldane and G.R.T. Ross, Vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967, p. 211.

NOTE 5. *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. N.K. Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1968) B131, p. 152.

NOTE 6. *Pragmatism and the Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), Lecture 4, p. 73.

NOTE 7. See my book *Historical Understanding in the Thought of Wilhelm Dilthey* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980). p. 10.

NOTE 8. "Autobiography," in Charles Darwin and Thomas Henry Huxley, *Autobiographies*, ed. Gavin de Beer (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 83-4.

NOTE 9. Published by Edwin Mellen Press of Lewiston, New York in 1988.

NOTE 10. *Athens and Jerusalem*, tr. Bernard Martin (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1966), p. 282.

NOTE 11. See the *Phaedo*, tr. Hugh Tredennick, in Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1969), pp. 120ff.

NOTE 12. *God in Modern Philosophy* (Chicago: Regnery, 1959), p. 88.

NOTE 13. See the *Phaedo*, p. 110.

NOTE 14. *On Religion: Addresses in Response to Its Cultured Despisers*, tr. Terence N. Tice (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1969), p. 142.

NOTE 15. It is a weakness in Bruce Demarest's book *General Revelation* (published by Zondervan of Grand Rapids in 1982) that it mentions Hume only once -- and then in passing (see p. 81).

NOTE 16. Published by Eerdmans of Grand Rapids in 1986.

NOTE 17. *Christianity and Classical Civilization* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), pp. 27, 34.

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