The Fourth

ERIC SYMES ABBOTT

Memorial Lecture

delivered by

Professor Rowan Williams
Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity
and Canon of Christ Church, Oxford

at Westminster Abbey
on Monday the fifteenth of May, 1989
and subsequently at Lincoln Minster and Keble College, Oxford

On Being Creatures

I.

Christian reflection on creation has been a bit of a Cinderella in twentieth-century theology – at least until the last few years, when a variety of pressures has brought it very much to the fore. New developments in cosmology have aroused some – rather confused – theological interest, on the one hand; and the daily increasing gravity of our environmental crisis has sharpened our concern to relate human interests and needs to the balance of the entire system of the world, on the other – so that we have begun to ask what it might mean to see the *unity* of our humanness with a material world both ordered and limited. Both these developments have very naturally prompted the raising of questions connected with the doctrine of creation. Less directly, pressure has come from certain feminist quarters: has not a redemption-oriented Christian theology functioned as an expression of the male urge to shake off the threatening and humiliating ties that bind spirit to body, to the earth, the cycle of reproduction, woman imaged as the sign of fallenness, of unspiritual nature? Hence the emergence of an interest in 'creation-centred spirituality', which "begins … with the theme of original blessing rather than original sin".[1] Its characteristic language is one of *trust* in the material order of the world, the rejection of nature-spirit dualism and indeed of the creator-creature divide, in a certain sense: the key term is 'panentheism', designating the way in which all beings have their life in God, in a simple, 'synchronous', interwoven pattern, a timeless moment which breaks in on our awareness as and when we see the transparency of beings to (God's) Being. This perception of the world becomes the foundation for a spirituality that is prophetically critical of our exploitative distance from our world, and generative of a universal compassion working towards justice. It is "the spiritual tradition that is the most Jewish, the most biblical, the most prophetic and the most like the kind Jesus of Nazareth preached and lived",[2] and it has, according to Matthew Fox, been largely forgotten in Western Christendom in recent centuries.

However, despite this rather naïve appeal to the obvious superiority of a 'biblical' spirituality, it is clear that Fox is putting some very grave questions to the whole of the classical Christian account of creation, biblical and post-biblical. It is not a simple matter of reclaiming one bit of Christian tradition to set against another. The problems are forcefully set out in Rosemary Ruether's *Sexism and God-Talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*,[3] which contains an intriguing discussion of the possible agenda underlying the Hebrew myth of creation in its distinctness from Babylonian and Canaanite thought-forms. For the latter, 'creation' is a movement of self-regulation *within* a single continuum, "the matrix of chaos-cosmos"; for the Hebrews, the creator is more like an artisan working on material *outside* his own nature, by what appears as "a combination of male seminal and cultural power (word-act) that shapes it 'from above'".[4] There is a correlation between cosmic order and moral righteousness: submission to the 'cultural' power of God – the power of God to name, define, locate things – will guarantee the world's harmony. This is already a step towards the more drastic hierarchicalism and alienation of the Greek model of the world's making, where human consciousness (implicitly male) is recognised as akin to the primary agency of God as mind, and foreign to the realm of matter. For Ruether, a theology of the creative matrix must be constructed; not in terms of the static immanence of Babylonian myth, but by understanding that history is *not* the liberation of spirit from nature. "Feminist theology needs to affirm the God of Exodus, of liberation and new being, but as rooted in the foundations of being rather than as its antithesis."[5] Instead of a view that privileges historical action as heroic rupture, breaking away from the natural and timeless, a kind of imitation of the primordial rupture between nothing and something which is the authoritative word of creation, we must develop a model of the divine as what encompasses and pervades the system of the universe, the ultimate resourcefulness that

enables the system (including our historical action) constantly to recover balance and harmony.[6] This also has the effect[7] of challenging traditional accounts of eschatology: if there is no single, 'linear' story of God's liberative action (a story bound to give unique power and definitional force to the human group that appropriates it), there is no movement to a last end, a millennium – only a confidence that, within the divine matrix, nothing is ultimately lost.

Many of these themes are echoed in the more recent work of Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age*.[8] Here again we find the suggestion that the classical view of creation sees it as an exercise of 'cultural' power, the giving of form to the (external) formless. This aesthetic view, God as artist, implies a certain detachment in God's *judgment* of the world: "An artist, upon completing a work, makes a judgment whether it is good or bad; the judgment is an aesthetic one based on critical standards".[9] These standards are, McFague suggests, 'neutral', not intrinsic to the person of the artist, in sharp contrast to the standards by which a parent judges a child; and it is this latter parental image of 'production' which we ought to be developing as a theological tool, since it allows a far more central importance to the idea of continuity between creator and creation, the bonds of kinship. Despite the problems of putting them together in a logical unity, the images of God as bringing creation to birth and of the world as God's body[10] have a real affinity. God's 'interests', if we can speak in such terms, are bound up with the world's; so that there can be no temptation to model one's behaviour on a God utterly without any investment in the life of creation, as if the best form of life were one which repudiated involvement in or dependency upon the material world.[11] God as maker of what is decisively not God is a dangerous notion, insofar as it generates and legitimates monarchical control over the world, dualistic contempt for the world and the exaltation of abstract 'spirit' – all the pathologies which, for McFague, afflict the culture of the present age, with its crises of international and environmental security.

There are several points of strain, if not contradiction, in all this. It is not at all clear how far for McFague 'Hebrew' thought (whatever exactly this is) escapes the charge of monarchical distortion simply by having a robust doctrine of covenant;[12] Ruether's critique cuts a good deal deeper than McFague allows on the question of pervasive patriarchialism in Jewish scripture. And the metaphor of the world as God's body – rather more carefully and comprehensively handled by Grace Jantzen – seems, paradoxically, to require a disturbingly stark dualism: we are *not* our bodes, after all, especially when those bodes are "sick, maimed, ageing, enslaved, or dying";[13] and if we are in the long run somehow not identical with our bodies, it is theologically safe to think of the world as God's body. We are not committed to seeing God's identity as dependent upon the material world;[14] God is in some sense free of any particular body or even the sum total of bodes, as we cannot wholly be. God could in principle form another 'body' to express the divine life, and we do not have that sort of freedom. Yet there is an analogy in the kind of relation we have to our bodies: "God relates sympathetically to the world, just as we relate sympathetically to our bodies".[15] This is baffling: 'sympathy' is surely the last thing I can feel for my body since it is my body that feels. If sympathy is the capacity to recognise with moral concern the kinship between another's situation and my own, I could only 'sympathise' with my body if 'I' were a kind of parallel being with a different history of sensations. The suspicion grows that the 'God's body' image can only work by trading on precisely the residual dualism that is elsewhere under attack, and by evading some plain and uncomfortable philosophical questions. The results, I think, are far more morally and spiritually worrying than anything the artistic analogy can produce; and McFague's treatment of this latter is again rather puzzling. Does any artist judge her works by these supposedly 'neutral' criteria? Isn't it rather that an artist 'judges' (the wrong word, anyway) the thing made by its own integrity and coherence, an integrity rooted in the artist's own sense of being-in-the-world? And it is perfectly possible to understand one's artistic failure as a moral and personal matter. Anyone disposed to think Sallie McFague right about artists might do worse than read Geoffrey's Hill's essay on *Poetry as 'Menace' and 'Atonement'*.[16]

There is some fundamental muddle here about the kind of difference we can and should speak of in relation to God and God's world. Both McFague and Ruether, the latter with more sharpness of focus, see the crises of the age as rooted, to a very significant extent, in the twin problems of dualism and hierarch; and they are entirely right to point to elements in the rhetoric and the narrative of much of traditional Christianity which display in strikingly clear form the disastrous possibilities of a certain kind of God-world differentiation, especially when coupled with a parallel spirit-nature disjunction. But neither writer spends long in trying to understand what exactly the doctrine of creation out of nothing actually means in the hands of those who have most carefully dealt with it, and what its implications might be for understanding or imagining ourselves as creatures. The weight of modern objection to what is thought to be the classical doctrine is, at the very least, a witness to the truth that no amount of theological refinement can, of itself, prevent the slide into destructive and sterile patterns of thought that license diseased or oppressive patterns of action and relation. But this means that the answer to the problem is not solely the generation of a new idiom (especially one which is confessedly full of conceptual strains), but should involve a hard look at what the original doctrine's logic is meant to state and safeguard – whether or not we finally decide to go on giving it the privilege it has had in the past. That is the task this lecture attempts to begin.

II.

The belief that God created the world out of nothing was unquestionably a *distinctive* Jewish and Christian view in the late antique world. Other accounts of creation may ascribe to God the initiative in setting things in motion or imposing order on passive matter; but the notion of an absolute origin is not to be found with anything like comparable clarity outside the Judaeo-Christian environment. There is a growing trend, of course, towards the view finally expressed in the great Plotinus' work, the source of Neoplatonism, that the entire complex world of things that can be known and talked about depends on or flows out of a simple, wholly unified primary reality, the One; but it would be odd to describe this as an *action* in the way 'creating' seems to be an action. Although it would take too long to discuss here the probable origins of the idea of creation from nothing, it is significant that such language seems to have emerged into full prominence around the time of Israel's return from Babylonian exile (above all in the 'Second Isaiah', Is. 40-55). This deliverance, decisive and unexpected, is like a second Exodus; and the Exodus in turn comes to be seen as a sort of recapitulation of creation. Out of a situation where there is no identity, where there are no names, only the anonymity of slavery or the powerlessness of the ghetto, God makes a human community, calls it *by name* (a recurrent motif in Is. 40-55), gives it or restores to it a territory. Nothing makes God do this except God's own free promise; from human chaos God makes human community. But this act is not a *process* by which shape is imposed on chaos: it is a summons, a call which establishes the very possibility of an answer. It is a short step to the conclusion that God's relation to the whole world is like this; not a struggle with pre-existing disorder that is then moulded into shape, but a pure summons. "My hand laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens; when I call to them, they stand forth together" (Is. 48.13). In the Exodus, God can be said to fight against the 'chaos' of Pharaoh's tyranny and to bring Israel out of the sea as the Babylonian gods brought the world out of watery chaos; but no literal battle is fought, and what exists after was simply not there before. More and more, creation is seen as performed by the free utterance of God alone; the imagery of moulding something out of something else recedes.

What is left is not even the 'cultural' activity described by Ruether: God does not impose a definition but creates an identity. Prior to God's word, there is nothing to impose *on*. This has some interesting implications. It mans that creation is *no sort of process*; it is not a change. Aquinas expressed with complete clarity what Isaiah's words ultimately entail when he said that 'creation' simply points you to existing reality in relation to a creator.[17] It does not indicate some

enormous event which would explain everything that came later; as Aquinas realised, the doctrine is equally compatible with thinking the universe had an identifiable beginning and thinking it exists eternally. It simply tells you that the entire situation of the universe, at any given moment, exists as a real situation because of God's reality being, as it were, turned away from God to generate what is not God. And this is not an explanation (because the existence of the world is not a puzzling fact, as opposed to other, straightforward facts; it is all the facts there are), but a statement that everything depends on the action of God.[18]

The point for our purposes is that it makes perfect sense, in such a perspective, to say that creation is not an exercise of divine *power*, odd though that certainly sounds. Power is exercised *by* x *over* y; but creation is not power, because it is not exercised *on* anything. We might, of course, want to say that creation presupposes a divine potentiality, or resourcefulness, or abundance of active life; and 'power' can sometimes be used in those senses. But what creation emphatically isn't is any kind of imposition or manipulation: it is not God imposing on us divinely-willed roles rather than the ones we 'naturally' might have, or defining us out of our own systems into God's. Creation affirms that to be here at all, to be a part of this natural order and to be the sort of thing capable of being named – or of having a role – is 'of God'; it *is* because God wants it so. And this implies that the Promethean myth of humanity struggling against God for its welfare and interests makes no sense: to be a creature cannot be to be a victim of an alien force (colonised by an alien 'culture'). Conversely, the overcoming of 'nature' as a proper goal for spirituality is highly problematic: we need a very careful theory of how nature is distorted or obscured before this language is remotely possible; an account, in effect, of how we mistake the unnatural for the natural.

Creation in the classical sense does not therefore involve some uncritical idea of God's 'monarchy'. The absolute freedom ascribed to God in creation means that God *cannot* make a reality that then needs to be actively governed, subdued, bent to the divine purpose away from its natural course. If God creates freely, God does not need the power of a sovereign; what is, is from God. God's sovereign purpose *is* what the world is becoming. This may throw some light on a further cluster of controversial issues to do with creation's absolute dependence on God – in the terms of classical theology, the fact that there is no 'real relation' between the world and God. The objection is quite often made that a relationship of unilateral dependence is incompatible with anything we could mean by love. Relations that we call 'loving' are *mutually* constructive; they are not all gift on one side and all receiving on the other. Such a pattern would mean that one party could never 'grow up' to the status of a giver, but would always be looking to have her or his needs met by the other – an infantile perspective; while the person who is defined as a 'giver' only is one we look on with some suspicion, asking what is being blocked or denied by the refusal or inability to receive. In short, if our relation to the creator is one of unconditional dependence, it looks as though both God and (rational) creatures are locked into a pattern which in the human context we should regard as diseased.

Dependence in human affairs is one of the most complex of subjects. We are afraid of it – both because of the diseased relationships that go with unbalanced dependence and, more deeply, because of the strong attraction of the human psyche towards the 'illusion of omnipotence', or at least the illusion of being an individual, self-regulating system. We have, in other words, both good and bad reasons for fearing dependence, and it is not always easy to distinguish between them. Ernest Becker's brilliant work, *The Denial of Death*,[19] speaks of our sense of ourselves as individuals as a 'vital lie'; to emerge as agents at all, so as to negotiate our position in a highly dangerous environment, we must believe in the possibility of 'equanimity' – balance and control. Yet to achieve the sense of this possibility, we require support from outside ourselves, from resources of symbolic power. Our problem is thus the overcoming of dependence *by* dependence: "We enter symbiotic relationships in order to get the security we need, in order to get relief from our anxieties …; but these relationships also bind us, they enslave us even further because they

support the lie we have fashioned".[20] To shore up our sense of independence, we intensify our dependence on those external factors which assure us of worth or meaning, while denying more and more stridently that we are involved in dependence at all. The *necessary* illusion of individuality thus condemns us to tragic compulsion, a diet of spiritual salt water. Any kind of health in this situation requires a twofold honesty: the recognition of the inevitability of dependence (since we are *not* self-regulating systems) and the recognition of the fundamental need to imagine oneself, nonetheless, as a true agent, not confined by dependence (in other words, a suspicion of whatever looks like a path of limitless dependence). We are in the almost intolerable position of needing to be educated to fear what we cannot but need.

However: if our fundamental need is for what enables us to stand over against our environment as agents, it should be clear that to recognise honestly the character of *that* need is to take a first step away from the compulsive search for 'piecemeal' securities, the shoring-up of identity by exploiting *specific* facets of the very environment which threatens to swallow the self; it might be possible, in the light of such a recognition, to distinguish the single underlying need for the sense of being an agent from any and every object-specific need, so as to learn some freedom from the pressure of object-specific needs. If I know that I *cannot* secure my sense of myself as agent by an ever-expanding exploitation of limited object needs, I shall at least avoid the appalling trap depicted by Becker – the evacuation of my selfhood by the pursuit of the self's security.

'Limitless dependence', in the sense of accumulating dependent relationships to things, persons, institutions, is something quite other than the *fundamental* dependence we cannot avoid, dependence on whatever it is that enables our sense of being an agent, a giver. And perhaps it is how we conceive that primary dependence that determines how vulnerable or how destructive our 'illusion' of agency is – how much of an 'illusion' in the ordinary sense of the word rather than the subtler Freudian sense of a belief constructed to meet or cope with the demands of what lies beyond the psyche. Sebastian Moore, in *The Inner Loneliness*, identifies our need to imagine ourselves as agents or givers as a need to know we exist *for another*. This is a crucial insight: it implies that to imagine ourselves as agents by imagining ourselves as self-regulating individuals is to misconceive our fundamental need, which is for identity in relation, conversation, mutual recognition. We can imagine ourselves as self-regulating entities, but can only make sense of – let alone *value* or *love* – what is thus imagined by adopting the standpoint of another: by presupposing relation. We cannot, as it were, get behind this and conceive a human identity that is primitively and only an object to itself. To think ourselves as agents or subjects is to think of ourselves as addressed or contemplated: "my self-awareness is something I am showing you, and your self-awareness is something you are showing me".[21] There is no self-awareness outside the commerce of agents and speakers. When I *think* I am imagining myself 'for myself', I am actually taking up the position of someone who looks at or speaks to me; and I couldn't do this if I did not know what it is to be looked at or spoken to.

Knowing this is knowing the 'illusion' of being a personal centre is one that is not, after all, created by the solitary ego struggling for a *modus Vivendi* (as Becker might seem to suggest), but is the tissue of the language-shaped world into which we are born; something without which we could not speak to – and so could not *see* – each other *as* other. Yet the awareness of my location within this world carries with it a realisation of the impossibility, for *any* inhabitant of the world, of being a pure source of meaning for other inhabitants of the world: all receive before they give, and give only as a response to their receiving. If my identity is given by the 'conversation' I enter at birth, that conversation is in turn a *generated* as well as a generating context. Nothing in the world is absolutely and unilaterally gift; and this can mean a certain persisting instability or insecurity in the tissue of our world. My meaning is given by the context I depend on; but so are other things – notably the oppressive cultural definitions that Ruether points to. The commerce in which we establish our identities is risky because we are also becoming the raw material of other identities: as in Hegel's famous metaphor of the lord and the serf, there is the possibility of becoming

instrumental to the self-formation of another person or group in a way which finally does not allow me to be seen as an agent and a giver. Even if I recognise the basic character of my need, that will not save me from falling victim to the rapacity of another who still conceives the human task as the exploitation of an environment to confirm the illusion of individuality. What offers to give me meaning and security also threatens to lay unacceptable claim upon me. So, when I have made the breakthrough into acknowledging the impossibility of creating an independent self out of my own will, when I have grasped that my being as agent depends on my receiving first, my being there, spoken to, acted on, I can still not be assured of my liberty to act or give because of the risk that I will be conscripted into the project of another. The fundamental need remains, to a greater or lesser degree, open, unmet. If I know that no human dependence can serve here, only two options remain: the constantly fearful and cautious negotiation of my identity, building up what is constructive in my relation to my environment, and vigilantly looking out for the danger represented by the 'cultural' power of others; or an act of trust in my right or capacity to act and give.

The doctrine of creation in its classical form is the religious ground for such an act of trust. To say, 'I exist (along with the whole of my environment) at God's will, I am unconditionally dependent upon God' means – at least – the following things. My existence in the world, *including* my need to imagine this as personal, active and giving, is 'of God'; my search for an identity is something rooted in God's freedom, which grounds the sheer thereness of the shared world I stand in. And to see that is *already* to have that need answered: my needful searching is part of what God gratuitously brings to be. The secret of understanding our createdness is that it makes both sense and nonsense of the 'search for identity': it justifies our need (ie it displays it as something other than a neutral fact) and it answers it. Before we are looked at, spoken to, acted on, we *are*, because of the look, the word, the act of God. God alone (as supremely free of the world) can bring a hearer into being by speaking, but uttering (making external, 'outering') what the life of God is, in a creative summons. We shall be returning to think further about the implications of this a little later.

We are here, then, we are real, because of God's 'word'; our reality is not and cannot be either earned by us or eroded by others. And to say that we are unilaterally dependent on God is to recognise that God alone is *beyond* the precarious exchanges of creatures who need affirmation. With God alone, I am dealing with what does not need to construct or negotiate an identity, what is free to be itself without the process of struggle. Properly understood, this is the most liberating affirmation we could ever hear. God does not and cannot lay claim upon me so as to 'become' God; what I am cannot be made functional for God's being; I can never be defined by the job of meeting God's needs. This is why I suggested earlier that our understanding of what was involved in depending on God might be helped by the recognition that creation is not an exercise of power by *x* over *y*. We do what we ought to do as creatures *not* when we attempt to resign from nature by treating 'God' as a successful rival for our attention or devotion ever against the things and persons of the world, but by our being-in-the-world. This most certainly does not mean (as some of the more philistine advocates of 'secular' theologies used to suggest) that reference to God becomes superfluous. On the contrary; on this analysis, we learn being-in-the-world precisely by learning that there is in the world no absolute and independent 'giver', no final source of naming, of identity, not I nor any other individual, nor any corporate identity. We become able to see all attempts *in* the world at providing definitions for other persons and groups as attempts to escape the world; only one 'power' is entirely gift, entirely directed away from its needs (for it has none), and all other powers need to be unmasked or demythologised. The creator's power-as-resource cannot be invoked to legitimise earthly power. Here there is only what I have called the 'negotiation' of needs, the patterns of giving and receiving, speaking and hearing – stripped of violence-inducing anxiety when they rest on the knowledge that the entire process is rooted in God's free utterance.

Moore's *Inner Loneliness* provides some further clues as to what might be involved in conceiving a God beyond need. I need a sense of active identity, which depends on being there *for* another; and clearly the optional form of being there for another is to be the object of another's

love, the cause of joy in them: "at root, self-love and self-gift are one … self-love flowers in self-giving, flowers *as* self-giving"[22] – or, as I'd prefer to say, self-love *presupposes* self-giving. I can't love myself without being a loved object, which means being, in some measure, given into another's hands, another's life. To say that God is without need is to say that God's identity does not *wait upon* being an object for what is not God. God, it seems, 'needs' only God. Yet there is a world, there *is* what is not God, something for which God is. As creatures, existing because of the utterance of God, we know that God desires to be God *for* what is not God – desires the pleasure or flourishing of what is not God. This desire is *groundless*, in the sense that nothing other than God causes it, and that it cannot be a device to assist God in being God, but it is not *arbitrary*, because there is no extraneous or random element within God's being as God. What God utters (as suggested earlier) is God: the summons to the world to be, and to find its fruition in being in the presence of God, sets 'outside' God the kind of life that is God's. So if God's act of creation gratuitously establishes God as the one who is supremely *there* for the world, it seems we must say that God is already one whose being is a 'being for', whose joy is eternally in the joy of another; and since God, as we have said, does not 'wait upon' becoming an object to another, we are led to think of God's own self as eternal identity in otherness, a self-affirming in giving away. "Love in God does not *result* but *originates* … because God is God, the absolutely original, the absolutely originating, and eternal process of self-affirming in self-love."[23]

There is a kind of closing of the circle here: what begins in the recognition of God's liberty in the saving interruption of history of the world, and leads to the vision of God as that upon which all things depend, ends in affirming the changeless consistency of God as love – saving interruption anchored (to borrow Ruether's words) in "the foundations of being"; the absolute difference between God and the world presupposed by the doctrine of creation from nothing becomes also a way of asserting the *continuity* between the being of God and the act of creation as the utterance and 'overflow' of divine life. Belief in creation from nothing is one reflective path towards understanding God as trinity; and belief in God as trinity, *intrinsic* self-love and self-gift, establishes that creation, while not 'needed' by God, is wholly in accord with the divine being as being-for-another. To put it provocatively: God creates 'in God's interest' (there could be no other motive for divine action); but that 'interest' is not the building-up of the divine life, which simply is what it is, but its giving away. For God to act for God's sake *is* for God to act for our sake.[24]

Jacques Pohier's remarkable and haunting book, *God in Fragments*,[25] brilliantly sets this out under the rubric, 'God does not want to be Everything'.[26] Pohier recalls Aquinas' startling *denial* that we ought to love things or persons as a means of loving God or as leading us to God: we should love them for their 'autonomy and consistency', for what the free love of God has made them. "God is the reason for loving, he is not the sole object of love":[27] it is God who makes it possible to love things and persons for what they are (because to believe in a free creator is to believe that nothing in the world can enslave us by being 'God' for us). But what is more, to treat God as 'Everything', as the immediate totality of meaning for each and every subject in the world, is to misunderstand the nature of our unconditional dependence on God. God establishes the worth, the legitimacy, the right to be there, of what is in the world, and in that sense gives meaning; but precisely what God does *not* do is to intrude into the integrity of this or that aspect of being in the world as a justification or explanation for specific events. If the explanation of every event, every determination of being, every phenomenon or decision were simply and directly God, then the life of creation would not be genuinely other than God. God grounds the reality and, in the theological sense, the goodness of the world's life, but does not answer specific 'Why?' questions. To think otherwise, Pohier suggests,[28] is for us actually to *reduce* God to ourselves, to define God as the answer, not to our 'need' for reality or identity, but our needs for control and for a world we can chart in relation to the centrality of ourselves - "and in consequence prevent him from being himself, being God, being other, being for us the life that he wants to be".[29] If we need God simply in order to understand and accept our very reality, then our relation to God in particular circumstances will *not* be one of need in the ordinary sense, a desperate effort to make God supply

this or that desired gratification, physical, intellectual or spiritual. We should instead be capable of receiving God as pure gift, unexpected good news - as the absolutely uncontainable, the irreducibly different; as *God*.

III.

It is, then, a doctrine of creation, properly understood, that grounds both our contemplation and our action. Coheir's insight means that we properly relate to God in gratitude and in silence: before God, we can only celebrate the fact that we *are*, and are free to be *human* with God for God and because of God; and wait without clear prediction or absolute conceptual security for the further perception of and delight in God's being God. Before the literally inconceivable fact of the divine difference and the divine liberty, we have no words except thanksgiving that, because God's life *is what it is*, we are. "We give thanks to Thee for Thy great glory." The contemplation of God, which is among other things the struggle to become the kind of person who can without fear be open to the divine activity, would not be possible if God were seen as an agent exercising power over others, bending them to the divine will. Contemplative prayer classically finds its focus in the awareness of God at the centre of the praying person's being - God as that by which I am myself - and, simultaneously, God at the centre of the whole world's being: a solidarity in creatureliness. It is the great specific against the myth of self-creation and isolated self-regulation. St John of the Cross speaks[30] of the vision of God in the state of union as a vision of the creator, and thus of the beauty which each creature has of itself from God, as well as "the wise, ordered, gracious and loving mutual correspondence" among creatures. To see God is to find place *in* this "correspondence". Contemplation, then, cannot properly be a prostration before a power outside us; it is a being present to ourselves *in* our world with acceptance and trust. Hence - though this would need longer to elaborate - the importance of attention to the praying *body*; the contemplative significance of taking time to *sense* ourselves in prayer, to perceive patiently what and where we materially are.

But to open myself to the divine action is to seek to discover that act which is wholly and purely the movement of a generosity that finds joy in being for the other. There is no 'private' or individual goal possible: our prayer is supposed to deliver us from what gets in the way of our immersion in and continuity with the act of God, what blocks our own happiness in each other. That human life which we believe to have been uniquely open to the divine act, the life of Jesus, is a life given to the creation of a people for God, a community without limit; and it is by this life that we begin to orient ourselves at all towards the creator in the first place. Our openness to God is our readiness for the action of a generosity creative of community to be 'enacted' in us - our readiness, therefore, to challenge and resist the making or remaking of exclusions and inequalities in creation. The discovery of solidarity in creatureliness has obvious consequences, which hardly need spelling out, for our sense of responsibility in the material world; it puts at once into question the model of unilateral mastery over the world. And if we can grasp this, we can also understand, perhaps, how bizarre a distortion it has been to think that the human spirit 'imitates' God by exploitative mastery. The creative life, death and resurrection of Jesus manifests a creator who works in, not against, our limits, our mortality: the creator who, as the one who calls being forth from nothing, gives without dominating.

We shall also know something about resistance to contemporary lies concerning the possibilities of corporate security in our world. Both the rhetoric and the practice of our defence policies often seem to offend against the acknowledgement of creatureliness - in two respects, at least. First, there is the offence against any notion of 'creaturely solidarity' implied by the threat not only to obliterate large numbers of the human race (all weaponry is in that sense a threat to our *common* sense of creatureliness) but to unleash what is acknowledged to be an uncontrollable and incalculable process of devastation in our material environment, an uncontainable injury to the ecology of the planet. Second, there is the extent to which our deterrent policies have become

bound to a particular kind of technological confidence: somewhere in the not-too-distant future, it might be possible to construct a defensive or aggressive military system which will provide a *final* security against attack, a final defence against the pressure of the 'other'. If I may repeat some words written in 1987 about the problems posed by the Strategic Defence Initiative, the Christian is bound to ask, "How far is the search for impregnability a withdrawal from the risks of conflict and change? A longing to block out the possibility of political repentance, drastic social criticism and reconstruction?"[31]

These references to our ecological and political infantilism should be a reminder that a 'creation-oriented' theology and spirituality cannot - *pace* Matthew Fox - afford to replace the concept of original sin with 'original blessing', if that means ignoring our deeply rooted aversion to our own creatureliness. At every turn we encounter this protest: in the kind of radically subjectivist theology that makes the abstract ego the legislator of spiritual identity and reduces the creator to a tool in this system; in the kind of religious and political fundamentalism that pins the human value of a person or a community to the injunctions of an extraneous defining and dominating power; in the world of personal relations, when people invest themselves totally in another person, not in covenanted and reciprocal loyalty, but in a desperate need for the other to provide a completeness of truth and meaning for them; and, as we have seen, in the obsessive games of national security and technological short cuts to gratification. Being a creature is in danger of becoming a lost art. My argument in this lecture has been that we are badly in need, not so much of a reworking of the doctrine of creation designed to eliminate what some have seen as the morally or spiritually damaging effects of believing God to be absolutely prior to and other than the world, as of a retrieval of the radical implications of such a belief for an understanding of our liberty before God. The critique provided by feminist theologies such as these of Ruether and McFague, and the attempt to conceive a non-dualistic or 'panentheist' spirituality in the works of writers like Fox, have a considerable importance in alerting us to the distortions to which the classical doctrine has fallen victim - God as monarch, God as imposing alien meanings, God as supremely successful manipulator of a cosmic 'environment'. But the simple, undialectical affirmation of God's identity with the cosmic continuum (an uncritical maternal image to replace an uncritical patriarchal image?) will not serve - as I think Ruether and McFague are themselves aware. Authentic difference, a being-with, not simply a being-in, difference that is grounded in the eternal being-with of God as trinity, is something which sets us free to be human - *distinctively* human, yet human in co-operation with others and with an entire world of differences. To know that our humanness is not functional to any purpose *imposed* from beyond is to know also the folly and blasphemy of treating portions of the human race as functional for the lives of other human beings (which is why this perspective ultimately *reinforces* a serious feminist critique, as well as having some implications about economics and race); and to know the equal folly and blasphemy of interpreting all creation in terms of its usefulness to transient human needs. Being creatures is learning humility, not as submission to an alien will, but as the acceptance of limit and death; *for* that acceptance, with all that it means in terms of our moral imagination and action, we are equipped by learning through the grace of Christ and the concrete fellowship of the Spirit, that God is "the desire by which all live",[32] the *creator*. In Anita Mason's superb novel, *The Illusionist*,[33] Peter's vision in Acts 10 is movingly reworked as a perception of the 'unimaginable order' and union in all things: the passage ends with words which may stand as a summary for much of this lecture. "'I am the Giver', said the voice. 'Trust me.'"[34]

****

Notes

[1] Matthew Fox on 'Creation-Centred Spirituality' in Gordon Wakefield's *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London 1983), p. 99.

[2] Matthew Fox, *Breakthough. Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality in New Translation* (New York 1980), p. 4.

[3] Boston 1983.

[4] p. 77.

[5] p. 71.

[6] pp. 85-92, 214-234.

[7] Ch. 10, especially p. 250-8.

[8] Philadelphia & London 1987.

[9] p. 111.

[10] pp. 69-78.

[11] p. 112; cf. pp. 72-4.

[12] p. 110.

[13] n. 14 on p. 201, referring to John Cobb's essay 'Feminism & Process Thought' in Sheila Greave Daveney (ed), *Feminism & Process Thought*, (New York 1981).

[14] pp. 71-2.

[15] p. 73.

[16] *The Lords of Limit: Essays on Literature and Ideas* (London 1984).

[17] *De Potentia* III.3.

[18] All this is very helpfully discussed in Gareth Moore's recent book on *Believing in God* (Edinburgh 1988), especially pp. 267-82.

[19] New York & London 1973.

[20] p. 56.

[21] Moore, *The Inner Loneliness* (London 1982), p. 9.

[22] Ibid. p. 24.

[23] Ibid., p. 108

[24] Cf ibid., p. 25.

[25] London 1985.

[26] pp. 266ff.

[27] p. 268.

[28] pp. 303-4.

[29] p. 304.

[30] Spiritual Canticle B xxxix. 11.

[31] *Star Wars: Safeguard or Threat? A Christian Perspective*, CANA Occasional Papers no 1 (Evesham 1987), p. 6.

[32] Moore, op cit, p. 117.

[33] London 1983.

[34] p. 137.