

vision of God's creation in the vastly expanded cosmic context of modern science, and in view of the quite new human ability to change the earth itself. The Christian tradition has two thousand years of reflection and prayer to help it in this task. But it could be that it is as yet only at the beginning of learning to fulfil its true vocation of helping to transform the earth to become a place where the spirit of love can bring many different sorts of human communities to a mutually enriching fulfilment.

This is a personal view of the main challenges facing Christianity in the modern world, though it aims to be based on a reasonably impartial view of the Christian churches as they actually exist. These churches, however, may sometimes be so far apart in beliefs and practices that they may seem like different religions. There are nevertheless central beliefs that unite them. One is a basic belief that the universe has been created by an immensely wise and powerful being. The universe thus has a purpose for its existence, it is not just an accident. This purpose has been made known on the planet earth in and through the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, and the purpose can ultimately be achieved by human beings who follow that life and teaching.

Beyond these basic beliefs, there is a huge variety of other beliefs and practices, some of them seemingly in sharp conflict with others. In the following pages I will try to outline some of the major Christian schools of thought.

Creation

All Christians believe that God created the universe. This is probably the most important of all Christian beliefs, because almost everything else will depend on how people understand the nature of God as creator. Even on the subject of creation there are different views, but almost all Christians believe that the universe is not self-existent, but has been intentionally brought into being (created) by a being beyond it, which is self-existent. Most scientists today think that the universe is between 10 and 20 thousand million years old, and that it has expanded from a primeval dot of virtually infinite density and mass to its present complex state, consisting of millions of galaxies, themselves containing millions of stars, and millions of planets. On most scientific accounts, the universe will go on expanding and cooling at the same time, until it runs out of heat and comes to a frozen stand-still. Or it may collapse in on itself again, and all things will end in an inescapable blaze of intense cosmic radiation. Whatever exactly happens, it seems clear that this physical universe will one day, a very long time in the future, cease to exist in anything like its present form. The universe, in other words, has a beginning and an end, at both of which nothing much happens. All the interesting things happen in the middle of its history.

Another thing most scientists agree about is that the universe is not chaotic. On the contrary, it seems to work in accordance with fairly simple principles which are elegant and beautiful, mathematically speaking. It is an extremely complex, mathematically elegant totality. Moreover, by the working of the laws of physics it has produced out of itself beings which are able to understand their own nature. In human beings – and maybe in countless other forms of

conscious life on other planets, unknown to us – the universe becomes self-conscious. Almost inconceivably complex bundles of atoms and molecules generate the amazing capacity to know and marvel at their own nature, and even to change it. The universe is not only beautiful; it is capable of knowing that it is, of admiring that beauty, and of creating new forms of beauty out of itself.

So the universe grows from an elementally simple state, where there is no knowledge, no complexity, no freedom and no creativity. It becomes conscious, at least in the most complex physical states known to us, human brains, and produces beings who are creative and free, who understand, communicate, love and create. Eventually it dies, probably returning to a frozen immobility where time itself ceases to have meaning, since there will be no change by which to measure it.

Perhaps that is all there is – an amazing, awe-inspiring story, which has no further explanation. But most people feel that the story suggests something else – such beauty, complexity, intelligibility and consciousness of value suggest a master consciousness which has brought it into being precisely because of the value it expresses. A cosmic mind could indeed produce such a universe, which realises sorts of values which could otherwise not exist at all. The creator could enjoy those values, and could also have the purpose of creating other personal agents who could enjoy them as well. Thus this vast cosmos could very easily be seen as being the purposive product of an immensely wise and powerful mind. That mind is the creator, causing the universe to exist for the sake of its beauty and value. On this view, the scientific story is one that fits very well with the Christian belief in creation.

First view: Six-day creation

Despite the majesty and persuasiveness of the scientific story, some Christians feel committed to a fairly literal interpretation of the

Bible, according to which (in Genesis chapter 1) the creator brings humans into being in a six-day process, beginning with the creation of light, then atmosphere, then the life-bearing earth, sun, moon and stars, birds and fish, and finally animals and human beings. Any such literal account does have problems with many of the claims made by contemporary science. It also seems in tension with another creation account given in Genesis chapter 2, where things appear to happen in a different order (humans exist before the animals, for example). And it concentrates on the planet earth as the centre of the universe, relegating the stars to a subordinate position. So it is a difficult view to maintain today. Nevertheless the account can be defended with some subtlety (for instance, by confining the account to events seen from the perspective of the earth, or by interpreting 'days' as long periods of time), and it needs to be assessed on its merits. Its central point is that the universe has a creator, who brings it into being by a gradual temporal process (the six 'days'). The process culminates in beings who are capable of conscious relationship to the creator, and whose task it is to care for and shape the earth and its other living forms. Despite the fact that it conflicts seriously with most scientific accounts, the core of the literalist view is that there is a creator with a purpose which is gradually worked out in the universe, and in which humans have an important role to play. That, I think, is the important spiritual teaching of the Biblical creation stories. Whether or not they are to be interpreted literally will largely depend on how one judges the available evidence from the natural sciences.

Second view: Timeless creation

Most Christians accept that contemporary science gives an accurate history of the universe. The two Genesis stories are then not taken literally, but are seen as poetic accounts with a spiritual teaching of the dependence of all things on God. As a matter of

fact, the best known Christian theologians have always stressed that the important point of the stories is not the literal account of what happened when the universe began. The stories present in the form of a narrative a teaching which is really about the present relationship of human beings, and of the whole universe in which they exist, to God.

St Augustine put this very clearly, in his classic work, 'The City of God', written in a Roman province of North Africa in the early fifth century. He pointed out that if God is really the creator of the whole universe, then God is the creator of space and time, as well as of everything in space-time. But then Augustine poses the question: if God creates time, what was God doing before he created time? The catch is that, if God created time itself, there cannot have been anything before time, and so God cannot have been doing anything at all!

This may sound like a trick – as though we have been trapped into agreeing that God could not have existed before the universe, or could not have thought about what he was doing before he did it. But it actually makes a very profound point, which Augustine brings out very clearly. What it shows, says Augustine, is that God is not in time at all. God, as the creator of time, is beyond the limitations of time. God exists 'eternally' – that is, not in time as we understand it at all. It is from that timeless eternity that God creates the whole space-time universe.

Thus Augustine forces us to think of the creation in a more sophisticated way. It is not that first of all God was alone and wondered what to do. Then, at a certain time, he decided to create a universe, so that the creation is the beginning of the universe – which is what a literal interpretation of the Genesis stories may lead us to think. What we have to try to grasp is that the creation is a relation between eternity and time, between the eternal God and the whole spatio-temporal universe. We might say that the whole of time issues from the eternity of God in one intelligent and purposeful act. The creation is not the beginning of the

universe. It is the dependence of the whole universe, from beginning to end, and at every point in the middle, on one intelligent, eternal and self-existent being, God.

The temporal form of the Genesis stories might hide that fact from us, making us think that the creation was just God getting the universe going, and then, perhaps, having a rest. What we have to see is that every moment of time is dependent on the eternal God, who is beyond every time (not 'before' or 'after' time!).

Once we see this, we can also see that it does not matter exactly what happened in the first few days of the existence of the universe. It does not matter if the universe never had a beginning at all. Scientists do think that the universe began, at the moment of the 'Big Bang'. But the Christian doctrine of creation is not concerned with whether the universe began or not. It just wants to say that, whether time began or whether it has always existed, it depends for its existence on an eternal being, a being beyond the limitations of time. That being is God, and we understand something very important about God when we realise that God is eternal.

One of the important things we realise is that God is quite beyond our imaginations. We can only imagine things that exist in time. So, when we try to imagine God, we naturally imagine him as thinking, deciding and acting in time. The Bible often speaks of God in this way – even as 'walking in the Garden of Eden' (Genesis 3:8), or changing his mind from time to time. We do not want to say that these things are totally false. But once we really grasp the doctrine of creation, we see that they can only be pictures to help us to think of God, but they do not really tell us what God is like. Such pictures may be revealed by God, to help us to relate ourselves to God in an appropriate way. But things go badly wrong when we think God is literally like those pictures, however helpful they might be. For the eternal God is wholly beyond our imaginations, infinitely bigger and more mysterious than we can ever think.

That is partly why the Bible forbids making any images of God (Exodus 20:4), and why the 'Holy of Holies', the innermost secret

sanctuary of the Jewish Temple, had no image of God in it. God is beyond all the limitations of our thoughts, and we must never try to reduce God to something that we can see or feel. So a very important part of the Christian doctrine of creation is that it insists on a very radical distinction between God and the whole of the universe. The universe begins and ends. It changes and develops. It could easily have been very different, as far as we can see. But it could not exist at all if it did not depend on a very different reality, the eternal reality of God. God does not begin or end, but exists eternally. God does not grow or decay, but is one and unchanging. God is, in a way we cannot fully understand, self-existent – does not depend on anything else for existence, but is, as the medieval philosopher Boethius put it, 'the unlimited ocean of being'.

It is quite inadequate, therefore, to think of God as finite, or as being a person who is something like a human person. God is the ultimate self-existent mystery of being, and the whole universe exists just because God brings it into existence by one intelligent and intentional act. All pictures of God, even those in the Bible, must only be aids to our imagination, since God is radically different from anything we can imagine. At this point, some Christians may feel a little uneasy. Have we not a true picture of God in the person of Jesus, after all? Do Christians not say that Jesus is God? So God must be imaginable, at least in the form of Jesus.

I will be saying more about this when we come to think about the doctrine of the Incarnation in chapter 6, about the way in which God is known in Jesus. But for the moment it may be helpful to hold a picture in our minds. Think of the whole universe, from beginning to end, from the Big Bang to the Big Freeze, as produced in one act by the eternal God. That is basically Augustine's picture of creation. All the things in the universe are finite, and naturally you cannot squeeze the infinite God into a finite universe. So God will always be infinitely greater than the universe, and radically different from it. Yet at the same time, the

universe will in a way express what God is, in something like the way in which a painting might express something of the personality of the painter. Some paintings might be better expressions of that personality than others. So, in the universe, some parts of it may express the nature of God better than others. It might be possible for a particular part of the universe to express the nature of God, in a way suitable for finite beings to understand, in a uniquely clear or adequate way. Christians would say that the person of Jesus expresses the nature of God in such a uniquely adequate way.

So a Christian would want to say that Jesus gives an adequate picture of the nature of God. But that means that this is the best picture which humans can understand. This is what God is like, insofar as God is expressed in time. The Christian claim is that the eternal God can express himself in time – again, just as a painter might express himself in a particular painting. But God will also remain far beyond time, just as the painter will remain distinct from his painting.

Now of course the analogy of the painter is not adequate to what Christians want to say about Jesus. For Jesus is a living, active person, not just a painting. In some way, this living person is a true image in time of a God who is beyond time. He is the temporal expression of an eternal God. Perhaps what it comes down to is this: Christians would say that there can be finite images of the eternal God, and Jesus is the perfect image of God. But we still must never confuse the image, the temporal expression, with the eternal reality, as if we were reducing the eternal into time, without remainder. There is a true expression of God in time, and so a true image. But it is still an image, and not the total reality of God.

The important thing, then, is to realise that all images, even Jesus, must be treated as images of the eternal God, not as reductions of God to some finite thing. Reducing God to any finite thing would be idolatry. But seeing a finite thing as an image of God, or a medium through which one can see God, or a vehicle

of God's purposes, is not idolatry at all. Indeed, Christians would probably say that you have to have such finite images to help to relate to the eternal God. As long as you remember that you are never reducing the eternal to something less, you can worship the eternal God in the person of Jesus, who is the way God appears in time.

The doctrine of creation, then, does not wholly exclude God from time. But it reminds us that God is infinitely far beyond time, even if he can truly appear in time. As God is beyond time, the future is as present to God as the present or the past. We experience our lives as passing through a series of times, one after the other, but to God the whole of created being exists in one timeless eternal 'now'. God sees what is future to us as eternally present. So God decrees what is to happen in the whole of the universe in his one eternal act of creation. That is basically what Augustine means by 'predestination'. It is as if God creates the whole of our lives at once, and so knows and decrees exactly what is going to happen to us at every moment of our lives. The future never slips from God's control, and all things are under the hand of God.

Predestination =
God's eternal character.

Third view: Continuous creation

Such a view of creation, however, has a price. The price is that God can never do anything new, that he has not eternally decided. Humans can never do anything that God has not, in some sense, eternally ordained that they should do. And God can never respond to human acts in new, creative ways, which are not already fixed by eternal and changeless decree. So some Christians, accepting that God is continuously creating, as the classical view holds, add that at each moment God is free to create in ways which he had not previously decided. God can, for instance, call Moses to serve him, and then wait to see how Moses

will respond. In view of the nature of Moses' response, God can then shape the future in an appropriate way. Creation will be a sort of continuing conversation between God and created persons, in which what happens will always depend partly on what creatures decide – though in the end, God remains in control.

This view of creation places much more stress on the reality of time, and it even makes God temporal, in that even God has an open future, makes new decisions, and changes in response to what human beings and other creatures do. Christians who hold the second view might object that this subjects God to the limitation of time, and so is unsatisfactory. If God is in time, he cannot be completely in control of the future, and cannot be the creator of time, which seems to exist independently of God.

Those who hold the third view, however, can agree that God exists beyond the limitations of time. But they would stress that the mode of such eternal existence is beyond human understanding, and that we have no access to the inner life of God. Certainly, God cannot be limited by time, as some sort of independent reality. But even those who hold the second view accept that the eternal God can truly appear or express the divine nature in time – that is what the Incarnation claims. So why can we not say that God freely chooses to enter into time, to become temporal, precisely as one expression of the unlimited reality of God?

Many contemporary theologians – like the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth – would argue that God is free to become temporal. While remaining beyond time, God can also have a freely willed temporal expression. But if God is truly temporal, then he can enter into a real relationship with finite persons. He can leave them free to make their own decisions, respond to those decisions, and co-operate with them in helping them to avoid evil and choose virtue.

If you take this view, you will not think of God creating the whole universe, from the first moment to the last, in one eternal act. Rather, you will think of God creating the universe in a series

fact

of acts, one after the other. So he might create Abraham, and call him to leave Ur and seek a new place to live. He might then wait to see how Abraham responds, before he creates the next bit of the universe, which will take Abraham's response into account. If Abraham had refused to leave Ur, the divine plan for the earth would have taken a different shape. But Abraham said yes, so the divine promise of a covenant with his descendants was made.

This gives human freedom and human decision-making a very important part to play in the working out of the divine plan for this earth. Some people fear that it puts the divine plan too much at risk, and makes God virtually powerless in his own universe. However, those who hold the third view would usually insist that God retains the power to do whatever he wants, and in particular to make sure that his purposes succeed eventually. But he restrains that power so that humans can be free and responsible. God gives humans a strictly limited freedom. They can thwart God's plans to quite a great extent – causing conflict and suffering and disharmony – but in the end God will realise his purpose for creation.

What that means is that God will not be able to predict exactly what is going to happen in the history of this planet, for example. He does not make Abraham decide in one way rather than another, and so he does not know in advance exactly what Abraham will decide. But God does plan to bring humans to salvation – to full knowledge and love of God. So he will ensure that happens, in one way or another. The failure of one plan leads to the forming of another, and God will go on devising new plans until one of them succeeds. However many failures there are along the way, in the end the general plan will succeed, because God has the patience, wisdom and power to ensure that it does.

This is a much more interactive view of creation, which sees God as co-operating with finite persons, and giving them real responsibility to realise the divine plan for creation. It makes predestination much more difficult than on the second view. Indeed, on the third view God does not predestine in one eternal decree

everything that is going to happen in history. But we can still say that God predestines that many will come to salvation, even though he might not be able to say in advance who exactly they are (some theologians, like Karl Barth, hold out the possibility that God might actually predestine everyone to salvation, and then of course he would know who they were).

God's interaction with creation can only take full effect when there exist responsible moral agents in the universe with whom God can interact. But this view does have some implications for our understanding of the physical structure of the universe. If the physical universe existed for billions of years before any created persons came into being, then God could be thought of as preparing the universe to be a suitable home for personal beings – for example, building into its fundamental laws elements of flexibility and 'randomness' which will allow creaturely freedom to come into existence in due course. It will be a probabilistic universe, rather than a deterministic one. Yet the universe will remain a place of elegant and intelligible beauty, expressing the wisdom and beauty of God even as it moves towards the emergence of those created persons whose destiny it is to become co-creators with God of the future.

On this view, God is continuously creating the universe, taking into account the free decisions of any rational creatures in the universe, and shaping an open future in co-operation with them. Finally, however, God controls the process, and will either eliminate those elements which remain resistant to him, or shape finite beings into freely responsive channels of his creative wisdom and love. Thus the universe is a creative and co-operative adventure of a God who is himself, at least in one important aspect of his being, in time – itself seen as the condition of real creativity.

Predestination