New Blackfriars

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God and Creation

Herbert McCabe O.P.[1]

To put things in some kind of perspective, let me begin with the geography and history and sociology of America. Consider the enormous sweep of that continent, the vast central plains, the Rockies, and the difference between Southern California and Cape Cod. Spare a thought for the human race's first experiment in wholesale democracy, and the attempt to bring together people of startlingly different traditions. Think of Melville, Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and James Hadley Chase. Think of the vast expansion of capitalism in the United States and the growth of its technology. Think of what you can remember of the war between the States, the Mexican wars, General Motors and the United Fruit Company. Meditate on the part that America has played in the world during and since the Second World War. Remember the civil rights movement, McCarthyism, Mayor Daly, and the Chicago Convention. There is a lot to think about, isn't there?

Now imagine some child who has just overheard someone say 'If it were not for America we would have no Kentucky Fried Chicken'. Suppose s/he has heard nothing else whatever about America. Suppose s/he doesn't even know whether 'America' means a person or a place or a sum of money or a cooking technique. This child, I want to say, would know enormously more about the intricacies of American politics, economics, history, geography, and way of life, than we know about God from knowing that God is Creator of the world. By comparison with theologians and philosophers who talk about God, this child would be a learned and scholarly expert on America. After all, a certain amount might be deduced about America from the fact that without it there would be no Kentucky Fried Chicken (at least there are several intelligent guesses and alternative

[1] This text is a previously unpublished lecture given in March of 1980 by Herbert McCabe OP (1926–2001) in Cape Town. The lecture has been edited for publication by Brian Davies OP, who is grateful to John O'Leary for having provided him with an electronic version of it based on a typescript and some hand written notes of McCabe. Some readers might think that the lecture here published ends somewhat abruptly. It should be explained, however, that it was originally delivered as the first of three connected lectures presented as a series. Pretty much the text of the second and third of those lectures can be found in chapters 2 and 3 of Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1987).

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scenarios one might construct), whereas we can deduce nothing we can understand about God from the fact that if it were not for God there would be nothing at all. We can, of course, know some things that could not possibly be true of God, and we are able to say things about God, to make statements which are not all negative in form. Unfortunately, though, we do not really know what these statements mean. They do not convey to us any information as to what God is like.

All this is what Thomas Aquinas meant when he said that because creation is an effect which is not adequate to its cause it does not tell us anything about what this cause is, only that it is. It is the knowledge or belief that there is *That–without–which–there–would–be–nothing–at–all* that permits us to speak of God. In other words, it is the content of this conviction that controls our use of the word 'God'.

We can use the word 'God' correctly or incorrectly, but the criterion for correct and incorrect use is not something we know about the nature of God. It is something that is thought to be true of our world. In other words, God's being creator of the world is what gives us our meaning for the word 'God'. I have in the past, even in print, I'm afraid, permitted myself to say that 'What Christians mean by God is: "He who raised Jesus from the dead"'. But I was wrong to say this. Christians believe that it was God and not anything else that raised Jesus from the dead. We cannot formulate our beliefs concerning Jesus without a prior knowledge of what the word 'God' means. As Edward Schillebeeckx says (I reproduce selections from a 128 word sentence): It has to be 'reasonably demonstrated that in and through [certain] experiences and identifications of "salvation", belonging to a particular human community, we really are in contact with the reality to which we human beings in the course of our history have ascribed the name of God, the Creator of all that is and is to be ... that in this person, Jesus of Nazareth, we actually have to do with the One who liberates and yet at the same time – however incomprehensibly – is the final arbiter of meaning, the "Creator of heaven and earth".[2] '*Et hoc omnes intelligunt Deum*', as Aquinas puts it. The notion of God as creating is basic to our use of the word. It does not, of course, follow that creation is basic to God. On the contrary, it is just because it isn't, just because it does not belong to the nature of God that God is a world maker, a Creator. It is just because of this that God's having happened to create the world doesn't tell us anything about God's nature.

The quotation from Schillebeeckx, however, indicates two, on the face of it, different determinants for the meaning of the word 'God':

[2] Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, tr. Hubert Hoskins (New York: The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 31.

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one is 'Creator of all that is' and the other is 'final arbiter of meaning'. The last phrase is a bit obscure, but you could see that someone might sensibly say 'without God the world would have no ultimate meaning' or 'ultimately no meaning' (two different but perhaps related phrases). I myself do not see how God could be said to give meaning to the world, or to be the final meaning or purpose of the world, unless God were the one who made it in some sense. But it is not unimaginable that some people might have a word meaning 'what it's all about', or 'the point of everything', or 'what makes the world not meaningless', and yet never have reflected on the world as created or made. And I think we might very reasonably say they were nonetheless talking about God.

However, in our culture at any rate, the use of the word 'God' is heavily conditioned by Genesis 1 and the sentence 'In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth'. In speaking of God the creator we are approaching the mystery through the notion of making. As we should expect, the notion gets badly mauled in the process. We end up saying 'God made the world', but not in the sense of 'making' that we ordinarily understand (and not, in fact, in any sense we can understand). But at least we do not end up saying 'God made the world but also God did not make the world'. In other words, I should say that we use the word 'make' here analogically and not just metaphorically. Metaphors can be inconsistent ('the still small voice'/'the shaking cedars'). They can also be simultaneously denied ('God is a warrior'/'God is not a warrior'). We cannot have the same inconsistency with literal usage, and analogy is a form of literal usage. As Aquinas sometimes put it, the difference between words used analogically is not that they differ in literal meaning but in their way of meaning (*modus significandi*).

When you say 'God is a warrior' and 'Goliath is a warrior' the word warrior is being used in exactly the same sense. What makes 'God is a warrior' metaphorical is not a variation in either the meaning or the *modus significandi* (way of meaning) of 'warrior' but the whole role of the sentence in which it occurs. I mean that the sentence (taken at random from *Pride and Prejudice*) 'But Elizabeth was not formed for ill humour' differs from the statement I might now make 'But Peter was not formed for ill-humour'. But it does not differ because of any differences in the meaning of the words. It is just that one is fiction and the other fact. The difference between 'God is a warrior' and 'Goliath is a warrior' is more like the difference between fiction and fact than it is like the difference between, say 'This curry is very good' and 'The weather is very good', a case of analogy. The word 'create' then, when used of God, has just the same meaning as the word 'make', but we use the special word 'create' in order to indicate a new *modus significandi*, a new way of meaning making. Now how does that work?

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To say that 'creation' is 'making' with-a-new-mode-of-meaning is to talk, I think, about the whole intellectual process by which you get to the word. The whole process and not just the end of it. I mean: you start by saying 'God made the world' and then you add various qualifications, all qualifications of a certain systematic kind, all qualifications, if you like, in a definite direction. And by the time you have finished, the notion of making has been whittled away. It has, as Antony Flew put it, 'died the death of a thousand qualifications'.[3] Flew was right about this. But he was wrong to conclude that the whole process was therefore nugatory. It is the intellectual process itself that matters, that points us towards what we cannot say. There is no short cut. You yourself have to go through the slow killing of the verb 'to make'. There is no separable end product, no finally refined concept, which is the meaning of the verb 'to create'. The death of the verb 'to make' is consummated in a resurrection as elusive as that of Christ. It does not simply come back to life. Just as the only way to get at the resurrection is to go through the crucifixion, so the only way to 'understand' creation is to attend to the whittling away and death of 'making'. We cannot just use an analogical term of this kind as we can use the word 'cat'. Every time we use it, or at least every time we use it with any understanding at all, we have to go again through the whole process of starting with a word used in one way and then taking away the *modus significandi*, qualifying the way it means until it disappears. Most theological mistakes come from carelessly thinking that we have now 'grasped' what our terms mean, that we no longer need to work them out again for ourselves. Theological understanding, such as it is, comes just as the meanings elude our grasp.

'God made everything' or 'God makes everything' sounds harmless enough at first, but let us look at some of the implications. In the first place, if God made everything, God cannot be included in everything. God can't be one of the beings that go to make up everything. So everything-plus-God is not any greater than everything just by itself (or themselves). If this is paradoxical it is because we have illegitimately used the phrase 'everything-plus-God'. You can only add together things that share some common nature or at least belong to some common class. You could add another egg to the clutch because they are all eggs. You could add in three wasps because they are all things in the basket. You could add a bicycle and twelve people because they are all things Fred noticed and thought about on Friday. And so on. But you can only add if you can find some way in which the items have something in common. What we have to do is to say that God has nothing in common with things, so that

[3] Antony Flew and Alasdair MacIntyre (ed.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1955), p.97.

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there isn't any sense to 'everything-plus-God', so that the paradox 'everything plus God is the same as everything', doesn't arise.

Do I hear you say that there is at least *this much* common between God and things: that they all exist, that they all have being? N things + God would be N + 1 beings or existents. But not so. To be existent is not a nature. An existent is not a kind of thing. 'Fido exists' means 'There is an X such that X is a dog (called Fido)'. 'Jumbo exists' means 'There is an X such that X is an elephant (called Jumbo)'. If you say 'There is an X such that X is', you haven't said anything yet, because you have simply not finished your sentence.

The famous doctrine of Aquinas that 'in God there is no distinction between essence and existence'[4] does not mean that in God's case uniquely you can say 'There is an X such that X is'. It does not mean that existence stands to God in the way that dogness stands to Fido or elephantineity (-itude?) stands to Jumbo. What it does mean we shall shortly see. For now, though, my point is that the fact that God exists and that everything exists does not imply that they have 'existence' in common, as Fido and Rover have dogness in common. There is not enough common ground between them for you to add God to everything. God is not part of everything. If God made everything, God is not a thing.

Next, if God made everything, then God did not make it out of anything, or at least there are some things that God did not make out of anything (for, of course, besides creating things, God might also make bubbles out of chewing gum just as we do.) So creation is making, but not making out of anything. When X is created there is not anything that is changed into X. Creation is *ex nihilo* (not out of anything). Creation, then, is not a change in anything; there was nothing to be changed. There was nothing to suffer an alteration when things were created, and similarly it does not make any difference to a thing that it is created. A created giraffe is just the same as a giraffe. Being created does not add any difference to being a giraffe in the way that being spotted or being hungry does. This is fortunate, for otherwise it would be impossible for God to create a giraffe. However hard God tried the result would always be a created giraffe, and that would be something different. It follows from this, or course, that you cannot deduce the activity of the Creator from the fact that things have the property of being created. There is no such property as the property of being created. The fact that things are created does not make the slightest detectable or undetectable difference to them, any more than being thought about makes a difference to things.

Let us now compare being created with being born or conceived or whenever you count as my coming into existence. Being born also

[4] Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 3,4.

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clearly makes no difference to me. Until I was born I was not there to have a difference made to me. But in this case a difference was made all the same, though not to me. A great change came over the world in 1926: hitherto it had been lacking Herbert; henceforth it contained Herbert. I do not say the lack of Herbert was a deprivation for the world before 1926. I do not usually see the first quarter of the 20th century groaning in expectation, labouring and yearning until Herbert was brought forth. It was simply that Herbert could have been made and was not yet made. In other words, before I came into existence I was potential in the world. I was possible, in the real sense that there were agents in the world which could bring me about. Let us forget for the moment complications such as that my soul is directly created by God and not simply caused by creatures. For what I am saying I could have used the example of Fido instead. So let me use Fido to be on the safe side. Before Fido began to exist there was a potentiality, a capability, a possibility, for his existence which had two aspects. On the active side, there were causes which were capable of bringing him into existence. On the passive side there were things that could be made into him. When the time came these active causes acted upon these passive things and changed them into Fido. This is the sense in which Fido was potential before he existed. When he came into existence by being born he did not, of course, change. But these active causes probably changed and these passive materials certainly changed. So in these two ways, actively and passively, the world was potential to Fido.

There is a third sense in which Fido was possible before he came into existence. This is sometimes called 'logical possibility'. While the real potentiality of which I have been speaking is a matter of the physical existence of real causes and real materials which can result in Fido, logical possibility is thought to be independent of any such vulgar facts. Fido is thought to be logically possible quite independently of any state of affairs; logical possibility is, so to speak, eternal. It was from eternity in some timeless sense possible that there would be a Fido. I think it is very important to see that this is a mistake. The so-called 'logical possibility' of Fido simply consists in the possibility of framing sentences concerning 'Fido' in some language. Logical possibility resides, not in eternity, but in the rules, semantic and syntactical, of the actual language that can speak of Fido, just as real potentiality resides in the actual causes that can produce Fido. As Aquinas says, potentiality, possibility, always resides in some actuality. Act is prior to potency. The logical possibility of Fido only seems eternal because language gives us the illusion that it is eternal and necessary.

The making of Fido, then, by birth (or generation, to use the conventional term) demands the pre-existence of a world which, actively and passively, is ready for him to be produced, and which changes

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in producing him. You may say that Fido, in being born, fills a Fido-shaped gap in the world. It is because things came into existence by generation that Aristotle thought that the whole world could not have come into existence. Evidently before there was any world there could not be a world-shaped gap in anything. There would be no world for the gap to be in. The whole world could not be potential or possible, only particular things within the world. It is nonsense to think of the world being generated from 'possible worlds', and hence, thought Aristotle, since it is here, it must always have been here. And if the only sense in which things can be said to come into existence were by generation, then this would be a perfectly valid argument. If the only thinkable sense in which things come into existence were generation, then a beginning of the whole world would be unthinkable. This is quite probably the case. Creation does seem unthinkable. Etienne Gilson thought that Aquinas was constrained by his belief that God made the world out of nothing (a belief he derived from the Hebrew-Christian tradition) to reflect on the possibility of a coming into existence which is not a generation but a coming into existence which not only makes no difference to the thing itself but even makes no difference to a world, which amounts to no difference at all. For Aristotle, potentiality has to be residing in an actual presupposed world. The sense in which Fido was potential, the sense in which Fido might not have been, is that this presupposed world might not have generated him. We can call this precariousness of Fido's existence his contingency. Fido's existence is contingent upon certain causes operating to bring him about. 'Fido might not have existed' means 'The world might not have resulted in Fido'. Yet Aquinas speaks of a different dimension of potentiality. Not now simple contingency, a potentiality which is Fido-over-against-a-world which might not have contained Fido, but the potentiality which is *Fido-over-against-nothing-at-all* (the possibility that Fido might not have been *created*). Aristotle dealt with the quite intelligible possibility that Fido might not have been generated, the possibility of a world empty of Fido. Aquinas invites us to look at the mysterious possibility that Fido might not have been created. He invites us to the vertiginous thought of just nothing at all. In technical language familiar to readers of Aquinas, when we contemplate (or try to contemplate) the possibility that Fido might not have been created, we should say that Fido's essence (nature) is potential with respect to *esse* (existence). And here we have a very strange kind of possibility, one which does not reside in an actuality being potential with respect to Fido, a potentiality without any actuality for it to be in. The temptation is always to confuse this possibility (which does not reside in any actual world) with what we called logical possibility (which seems not to reside in any actual world). The temptation is to think that the distinction between *esse* and essence in creatures is

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just the fact that you can have a concept of a dodo even though there aren't any dodos. But the fact that you can think of something not existing does not mean that its essence and existence are distinct; it is merely a fact about the way our language works. The distinction of essence and existence in a thing means that it might not have been created, and the only reason why we mention this is in order to deny it of God. To say that there is no distinction of essence and existence in God is not to say that God's essence is existence in the sense that Fido's essence is dogness. It is simply to say that God is uncreated. It is to say that there no possibility that God might not have been in the common or garden sense of contingency (as Fido is contingent in that he might not have been generated). But it is also to say that there is no possibility that God might not have been in the sense of createdness. It is important to be clear about this for even Aquinas himself in a very early work, *De ente et essentia*, seems to treat the fact that you can think of X without knowing or caring whether X exists as a reason for saying that its essence and existence are distinct. But this is a mistake: it does not follow from the fact that you can think of dodos although there are no dodos (the fact that dodos are logically possible) that the essence of a dodo is distinct from its existence.

There are three main things to consider:

(1) Fido might not exist, and might not have existed.
(2) You can think of Fido without knowing or caring whether he exists.
(3) Fido might not have been created.

The first refers to the ordinary contingency, potentiality, of Fido, to what Aquinas calls the composition of matter and form in Fido, or if you like, the fact that what it is to be Fido includes the factor of matter as well as form, of potentiality as well as actuality. This means that although Fido has his form he can lose it and be turned into something else (he can perish) and that similarly he acquired this form (although he might not have done so) by something else happening to be turned into him. Things that are composed of matter and of form are material things and are the only things that can be made (generated) and can perish. If you had a non-material thing in which the essence were simply form without matter (an angel) it could not be made out of anything else nor could it perish by turning into something else. When an angel does not exist it is not really potential (there is no world with an angel-shaped gap; there is nothing that can be turned into the angel). In this sense there is no such thing as a possible angel. Nor is there such a thing as a logically possible angel, for, since we have no concept of angels, we cannot deal with them in language, and so called logical possibility is nothing but the

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capability of a language to generate sentences. The only sense in which angels are 'possible' is that they are created and might not have been created. Their essences are potential with respect to their existence. Material things have two sorts of possibility: with respect to the causes in the world which brought them about but might not have done, and with respect to God who created them but might not have done. Angels only have this second kind of possibility. This means that while, given a sufficiently developed biology, the meaning of the word 'cat' might correspond to and represent the essence of a cat, the meaning of the word 'angel' or the word 'Gabriel' never represents the essence. We know how to use the word 'Gabriel' (just as with the word 'God') not because we have even the beginnings of a hazy notion of what Gabriel is, but because of what we know of other things. (We only have the beginnings of a hazy notion of what a cat is, but it is one of tasks of biology to make this understanding more precise. There is no way we could even begin to know what Gabriel is.) If, *per impossibile*, we did know what an angel is, if we knew the essence of an angel, we would know that it existed (because there could be no such notion as the notion of a possible angel).

With material things it is like this: to know a thing's essence is to know the meaning of its name, but not conversely (we may be a little hazy about both). To know what a horse is, is to know what 'horse' means, how to use the word 'horse'. When all the horses die, although there is now of course no essence, we can go on understanding the meaning of the word 'horse'. It is not that the essence of any horse has been separated from its existence (that can never occur); it is just that the act of understanding by which we understand the essence is now an act of understanding of the meaning of a word. It is only material things that go out of existence in this way, leaving their names behind them like ghosts. But then it is only material things that have names. If, *per impossibile*, we had a name for an angel, that is, if we had a word whose meaning was the essence of the angel (as the meaning of 'horse' is [an approximation to] the essence of a horse), then to know that meaning and to know that essence would also be to know the existence of the angel. This would have no tendency to show that essence and existence are identical in the angel. Certainly, if an angel has, or rather is, an essence, then it has existence. But this is true of a horse too, for all essences must exist (that's what the word 'essence' means). It is just that with the horse the ghost of essence (the meaning of the name) carries on when the existence and essence have gone.

Our language is the way we have of making sense of (making intelligible) our material world. This means that (a) the only thing we understand, as Aquinas puts it, are the natures of material things, and (b) the grammar of our language is the grammar of the material

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world. What I mean by this latter remark is that the contingency of material things shows up in our language as the logical contingency of sentences, but their createdness does not. It is a contingent fact that Fido is brown (it may or may not be the case), and, correspondingly, the sentence 'Fido is brown' is logically contingent. 'Fido is not brown' makes just as much sense. We can construct non-contingent, necessary sentences in our language, but they turn out to be statements of the grammar of the language itself. Amongst statements about the grammar of our language I include such statements as 'A human being is a linguistic animal' which (if there is a human being) is true and non-contingently true. ('A human being is not a linguistic animal' does not make sense.) What Aquinas called definitions, which state the essence of things, are statements of the grammar of the language. This correspondence between mode of being (contingency) and logical form (logical contingency) breaks down when we try to use words to speak of angels or God. Thus, although God exists necessarily, the proposition 'God exists' is not a logically necessary one. Conversely, to show that some equivalent of the sentence 'God exists' is logically necessary (as in the Ontological Argument) has no tendency to show that God exists necessarily, or indeed exists at all. See Aquinas's brilliantly laconic refutation of Anselm in *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 2, ad 1. The aim of an argument for the existence of God is of course to show not that 'God exists' is logically necessary, but that it is necessary that it is true, and this is shown not by what we know of God or the meaning of the word 'God' but by what we know of the world: that there might have been nothing at all.

What we know of the world is that it bears a relation to a Creator. The relationship is not, of course, real in God (just as the relationship of being looked at is not real in what you are looking at), but it is a reality in the creature. This reality is not, however, one which makes a difference to the creature. It is in fact the distinction of *esse* and essence, the fact that the essence of the creature is in potency to its *esse*. This relationship, then, between the creature, which is, but might have been nothing (not merely potential), and God, which cannot in any sense not be, the relationship of the creature in which essence and *esse* are distinct, and God in whom they are not distinct is what creation is. It is clear how far away we are by now from the original idea of making.

If this is what is meant by creation then the created world may well have always existed. Aquinas thought that the Bible tells us otherwise, but this seems to me to be rather dubious exegesis. It is also clear that creation is not something that can be investigated by the physicist. The notion of creation is entirely neutral as between theories as to the physical origin of our universe. Finally, may I remind you that what I have called the 'notion of creation' is not

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intelligible to us. We do not understand what creation means. We merely point towards it in the process of qualifying to death the notion of God-making-the-world. For the world to be created is for it to exist instead of nothing. And we can have no concept of nothing. We can have no concept of creation (any more than of God), but this will not, I trust, prevent us from talking about them.

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