

# *Collected Writings of John Murray*

## *Volume One: The Claims of Truth*

### **"The Significance of the Doctrine of Creation"**

Nothing is more basic and determinative in shaping our thought than is our conception of God. The thought that does not begin with God and move towards him is essentially godless and therefore ungodly.

It might seem that the doctrine of creation is only remotely or, at least, secondarily involved in our conception of God. It is true that God is self-existent and self-sufficient. He is not dependent upon creation, and the act of creation did not change his being and internal necessary relations. Creation did not add anything to his eternal and inherent perfections. It might therefore be plausibly argued that our conception of God is not determined by that which God has created, and that our conception of God is independent of the view of creation we entertain. Let us not prejudice our view of God, it might be said, by introducing concepts of creation, since creation is really extraneous to the being, perfections and internal relations of the eternally blessed, self-subsistent and self-sufficient Godhead.

The fallacy of this line of argument is that we are speaking now of *our* conception of God. We are not self-existent and self-sufficient beings, existing in abstraction from creation, and viewing God in his eternal being and independence by some kind of super-intuition and perception. We are dependent beings, and it is only by creation and in the context of creation that we think and entertain a conception of God. When *we* think, and particularly when we think of God, we think as beings conditioned by creation. In other words, when *we* think of God we cannot think of God aright without thinking of our relation to him. Even if the thought of our relation to him is not in the forefront of consciousness at a particular time, it must always be in the immediate background conditioning our whole attitude in thinking of him. To be quite specific, any thought of God by us must be conditioned by a profound apprehension of his transcendent majesty and glory; in a word, that he is God and that there is none else beside him. Our thought must always be determined by the fear of God. Reverence is the very soul of true thought, and worship is its invariable result. But why reverence and worship? Simply because he is God and we are his creatures. So far then as *we* are concerned, we can never think of God without thinking of God as God and of ourselves as his creatures. In other words, the thought of creation, the thought of our dependence upon God, is implicated in any true thought *we* entertain with respect to God. Without the concept of creation, then, we cannot think even one right thought of God. Hence the significance of creation for our conception of God and therefore for the Christian position.

There are, however, other respects in which the doctrine of creation basically affects our

conception of God. Not only does our relation to God affect our thought of God, and must always condition our thought of him; it also affects our thought of the relation to God of the world in which we live. We live in space and time, and it is foolish to try to abstract ourselves from the conditions of space and time. They condition our thought as well as ourselves. Whence are they? Do they condition God? Our very relation to them compels us to ask: What is their relation to God? Obviously if they are aspects of his being they immediately determine our conception of God. And if they are not, whence came they, or whence are they?

We can readily see how germane is the first word of the Scripture, that God created the heavens and the earth, and the commentary of the Psalmist, 'By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth'. All that which exists distinct from God himself owes its origin to the sovereign will and fiat of God. The whole of reality distinct from God himself is dependent upon God and dependent upon him because he caused it to be. The doctrine of creation affects the sole eternity and universal sovereignty of God. If anything that exists exists apart from the creative will of God, then we must posit something alongside of God and independent of him, and then we have adopted a dualism that cuts athwart the sole eternity, sole self-existence and universal sovereignty of God. And this means that he is not God.

Our topic is the significance of creation for our Christian position, and more is involved in the Christian position than our conception of God. We may now ask: How does the doctrine of creation affect our *faith*. It needs no proof to affirm that the Christian position is one of faith in God. The Christian position is one of Christian *faith*. The Christian redemption contemplates communion with God and without faith it is impossible to please him.

The faith of the Christian religion is the faith of God's redemptive grace, and redemption has no meaning apart from sin. Sin and redemption therefore set the points for the describing of the orbit within which, or in relation to which, Christian faith has meaning. How does creation affect these two points?

Creation means that all things owe their origin and existence to the will and fiat of God. Since God is just in all his ways and holy in all his works, this implies the inherent goodness of creation. It is not without profound meaning that it is written, 'And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good'. In no form did evil inhere in creation. Evil in all its forms, and particularly in the specific form that we call sin, originated subsequent to creation, that is, after God had finished all his works which he created and made. Two negatives follow from this: first, that evil and sin are not eternal; second, that sin and evil were not resident in God's created handiwork. Sin had an origin, and it originated subsequent to creation. Man, in particular, was created in the image of God and therefore replete with that which is the opposite of sin, namely, knowledge, righteousness and holiness. For sin as sin, for sin as guilt, man is responsible, and man alone is responsible. When viewed either seminally or actually it cannot be referred to divine authorship. On any other position it is impossible to maintain a doctrine of sin as the contradiction of the divine will and perfection.

For if we suppose that sin is something *necessarily* emanating from an entity that existed independently of God and outside of man, then at least man is not responsible. With the implications of such a supposition for God we have already dealt. If we suppose that sin is something necessarily arising from the constitution of man, then it is something belonging to the constitution of man, either because God in forming man was compelled to form man that way, or because God freely made man that way. On the first alternative we may shield God's responsibility at the expense of his sovereign power. On the second alternative God is directly responsible for making man with an evil constitution. But, on either alternative, man is not responsible: he is the helpless victim of the nature with which he is endowed. Human responsibility is removed, and with responsibility goes guilt, and with guilt goes sin!

We can see, then, how indispensable to the doctrine of human sin is the doctrine of creation. Creation was in its whole extent very good, and sin was not a necessity arising from that creation nor a necessity arising from the nature with which man was endowed. It originated as a free movement of defection and apostasy within man's own bosom.

How does creation affect the other focal point in Christian faith, namely, redemption? Redemption saves from and annuls sin, and sin is the contradiction of the divine will and perfection. Ultimately sin is the one and only thing in God's universe that is recalcitrant with reference to God. It is the one thing that is opposite to him. Other evils may in a sense be said to be opposite to him also. But all other evils are derivative from sin and they are the result of the reaction of the divine holiness to sin. So we may say that sin is the one and only thing in which contradiction to God inheres. Yet it is sin that redemption overcomes and destroys. Redemption cannot be defined as anything less than the making an end of sin and its evil consequences.

Now if God is to overcome sin it must be within the realm of God's government, that is to say, within the realm in which he exercises such absolute sway that he can deal effectively with it. If we do not hold a pure doctrine of creation, then we have opened the door for the positing of the existence of something that exists independently of God, and therefore of something outside the realm of his government. In that moment we have posited the existence of a realm that is unamenable to his absolute sway, and therefore a realm within which sin may be impervious to his redeeming power. We can see therefore the stake that redemption has in the fact of creation. Sin is not something that exists outside the universe that has come to be by God's omnipotent fiat and sovereign will.

It should not surprise us therefore that the Epistle to the Hebrews, conceiving of faith as projection into an unseen and hoped-for realm, should co-ordinate the faith, indeed identify the faith, by which believers in all ages were accepted by God, by which they lived the life of righteousness and by which they attained to the promise of an eternal inheritance, with the very faith by which we believe that the worlds were framed by the Word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.

Finally, the doctrine of creation affects our teleology, our philosophy of the end of all things. Nothing is more essential to, and determinative of the Christian position than that the end of all things is the glory of God. 'Of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen' (Rom. 11:36). All things have their beginning and their end in God. The relevancy of creation to this truth is apparent. In the words of Revelation 4:11, 'Worthy art thou, our Lord and our God, to receive the glory and the honour and the power: for thou didst create all things, and because of thy will they were, and were created'.

"The Significance of the Doctrine of Creation," in *Collected Writings of John Murray, Volume One: The Claims of Truth* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976). **Note:** The text has not been modified.