

CREATION, CONTINGENCY, AND SACRAMENTALITY

JOHN E. THIEL

One of the distinctive features of Christian faith is its claim that salvation is mediated through the created order. Christianity is not a religion wherein human fulfillment wells up from the depths of subjectivity, where fulfillment is a self-actualized achievement accomplished by an extraordinary act of the mind or the will. Rather, the Christian tradition has always affirmed the giftedness of salvation, and that this giftedness has its source in God's divine love. Eternal life is mediated because it is divinely given and humanly received. Salvation is mediated because the unseen God communicates the gift of eternal life through the Mediator, the Eternal Word, whose life, death, and resurrection reconciles the estrangement that sin has wrought in the community of persons. The Mediator of the unseen God, himself God, embraced actual humanity and appeared visibly in the world. The Mediator did not accomplish his redemptive work in the unseen immediacy of our inner lives, but through the concrete events of his own when he "lived among us" and in his visibility could be seen "his glory, the glory of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14). The Christian belief in salvational mediation is consummately expressed in the doctrine of the Incarnation.

To the degree that a religious tradition is a network of enmeshed beliefs, a central doctrine like the Incarnation unsurprisingly extends its claim for the concreteness of salvational mediation in a host of other doctrines like the resurrection of the body and eucharistic real presence, the profound witness of the saintly life and the graceful efficacy of the sacraments. And yet, though the Incarnation is the central Christian doctrine of mediation, this Christian doctrine draws so much of its meaning from the ancient Jewish doctrine of creation. Indeed, as a kind of theological lifeblood, the doctrine of creation courses through all the doctrines I have just cited as examples of salvational mediation. These doctrines all share the values of the doctrine of creation—that being itself is a divine gift and a sharing of God's own infinite being in a finite way, that created being is good, that because created being is good it is redeemable, and that the redemption of created being takes place in and through created being, not in spite of it or as an escape from it. The doctrine of creation maintains that matter matters, not only in the mediated way that God redeems but also in the divine life itself, which unfolds its trinitarian being in economic relationship to what is not-God.

In its most general expression, we call this perspective the "sacramentality" of the Christian worldview, the theme of our convention. Here, we can appreciate the meaning of this sacramentality by appealing to the simple and concise definition of "sacrament" that Augustine offered so many centuries ago: a sacrament is a visible sign of invisible grace.¹ This broader sacramental worldview is shaped by the belief that Jesus Christ is himself, in Edward Schillebeeckx's words, the "sacrament of the encounter with God."² The doctrine of the Incarnation, we might say, Christianly particularizes the doctrine of creation. John's rewriting of

¹ "On the subject of the sacrament...the signs of divine things are, it is true, things visible, but...the invisible things themselves are also honored in them..." (Augustine, "On the Catechising of the Uninstructed," in *St. Augustine: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, vol. III, ed. P. Schaff, trans. S.D.F. Salmond [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980], 312, no. 26.50).

² Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963).

Genesis in the prologue to his Gospel exemplifies the point so well: “In the beginning was the Word” (Jn 1:1). He identifies so clearly the saving precedent that the ancient author of Genesis could not name in his account of God’s creation of the heavens and the earth. If the doctrine of creation is the language of Christian sacramentality, then the doctrine of the Incarnation is its more explicit grammar.

In this address I would like to reflect on the doctrine of creation and thus on the Christian tradition’s belief in sacramentality, i.e., the capacity of created matter to mediate the grace and love, the providence and salvation of God. I will not conduct these reflections sanguinely, by highlighting the Christian claim, expressed so eloquently by medieval theologians, that creation is one, true, beautiful, and good. While affirming the truth of those qualities of the created universe, I will consider the challenges to Christian faith that are posed by the traditional doctrine of creation. Rather than quickly extolling the transcendental qualities of creation that inspire wonder and appreciation, I will explore the ways creation seems at times to be anything but one, and true, and beautiful, and good. Rather than beginning as do many environmental theologies with the ethical failures of human individuals and communities in their relentless assaults on the Earth, I will begin by considering all the ways in which the behavior of the created order assaults human individuals and communities. Rather than quickly finding graceful comfort in an aesthetical theology that sees God’s providence reflected radiantly in the created order, I will take stock of all the evidence that questions the adequacy of such a theological perspective and the implications of that evidence for a theology of sacramentality.

From these introductory remarks, it should be clear that I intend to problematize the doctrine of creation. This may seem like an odd thing to do. The doctrine of creation has remained untroubled throughout nearly all of Christian history, ever since the early Church fathers theologically vanquished the Gnostics. Theologians in the modern period have largely ignored occasions to face the difficult evidence for a theology of creation. Hume’s acidic attacks on the doctrine of creation in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* have been virtually ignored by theologians from his day until ours, even if philosophers of religion have tried their hand at a response in the project of theodicy.³ Darwin might have jarred the doctrine of creation in its broad parameters had not theological response attended rather exclusively to the issue of theological anthropology. And theology’s more recent dialogue with the natural sciences, especially physics, often has been motivated by aesthetical sensibilities that venture a correlationist harmony between the latest scientific theories and the doctrine of creation. I propose that troubling about the doctrine of creation can be theologically productive and, if I am successful in my troubling here, can yield some interesting results regarding Christian sacramentality. But at the very least, troubling about the doctrine of creation will address a neuralgic issue at the heart of faith.

CONTINGENCY, OR WHAT’S WRONG WITH THE WORLD?

In order to conduct my reflections systematically, I introduce the category of “contingency” to describe a certain feature of the natural world that Christians call “creation.” By “contingency,” I mean the natural world’s apparent randomness of behavior not just in this or that natural event, but throughout the history of cosmic evolution. The natural contingency I highlight is not the contingency that traditional theology defines as the dependence of finite

³ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. H. D. Aiken (New York: Hafner Publishing, 1969).

being on God's necessary being. The contingency I am defining describes nature's probabilistic variability, even within the context of its Newtonian predictability. Even Aquinas' fifth way, a theological argument that enlists the predictability of unintelligent nature to prove the existence of a supernatural intelligent designer, acknowledges the presence of this randomness within nature's otherwise ordered performance. As you may know, Thomas offers the evidence for God's providential design with the qualification that the "behavior [of natural bodies lacking awareness] *hardly ever* varies, and will *practically always* turn out well."⁴ Believers in divine providence like Thomas and us prefer to look to the bright side of the doctrine of creation, attending to the order and teleology that faith finds and appreciates in the gift of creation. Our contemporary knowledge of the workings of the universe, though, requires us to address the variance in nature's behavior that Aquinas noticed. As we explore the theological implications of this contingency we need to notice Thomas' implied observation that, when nature's behavior varies, things often do not go well for human beings. No doubt, contingency in the behavior of nature has benefitted humanity in all sorts of ways. Just think, to offer the most dramatic example, of how the mutation in the evolution of life, regarded as chance by scientists, has allowed the appearance of our own species. Faith, of course, finds providence in what scientific account portrays as the workings of blind chance, especially when the results are judged good by the only known species capable of such judgment. But what about the other side of random variation where the results are judged by human persons to be encounters with evil that cause human suffering? Let us consider this evidence.

Modern physics has shown that the natural world behaves in a thoroughly random fashion to the depths of its being. As much as classical Newtonian physics challenged theology with its capacity to explain nature well apart from scriptural revelation, its macro account of predictable natural laws squared rather neatly with traditional belief in God's providence. Furthermore, Newtonian confidence that reason was the source of such explanation could be attractive to any Christian tradition that held to the compatibility of reason and faith. Exploration of the micro world in twentieth-century physics offers a much more difficult scenario for theology to explain. According to a quantum understanding of the universe, which physicists regard as axiomatic, the behavior of subatomic particles is not regulated by the natural laws that predictably govern the macro world. Instead, their behavior unfolds randomly and so in a way that can be accounted for only with statistical probability. The discovery of this unpredictability in the micro world, scientifically expressed, in part by Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, came as something of a shock to twentieth-century physics. We are all familiar with Einstein's famous frustration with the strange contingency of the micro world, expressed in his bon mot that God "does not play dice."⁵ Speaking of quantum theory more recently, Physics Nobel laureate Richard Feynman has confessed "I don't understand it, nobody does."⁶ Feynman, of course, understands the mathematics of quantum theory and the way that the theory aligns with the physical evidence. What eludes his understanding is the strange behavior of the natural world at the most elementary level of its existence. My late colleague, the Jesuit theologian Christopher Mooney, described the problem with his usual clarity:

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 1, part 1, ed. T. Gilby, O.P. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), 70 (*ST I*, q. 2, art. 3). Emphasis mine.

⁵ Quoted in Christopher F. Mooney, S.J., *Theology and Scientific Knowledge: Changing Models of God's Presence in the World* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1996), 86.

⁶ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 71.

those clear-cut physical processes of classic Newtonian physics, with specific causes inexorably determining specific events at specific moments in time, now appear at their subatomic level to dissolve into constituent roots that, while able in large part to be rationally structured, are nevertheless elusive and probabilistic, characterized by fitfulness and shadowy unreliability.⁷

Given the randomness of the behavior of the natural world at this most elementary level, it is not surprising that contingency spills out into every dimension of what Christians claim is the created order. As much as Newtonian physics seems to tame contingency at the macro level, our increasing knowledge of the universe suggests that what Mooney describes as nature's "fitfulness and shadowy unreliability" courses through the order of things. Let us consider just a few examples from the grandest dimensions of the universe to its smallest.

In the past twelve years, physicists have sought to explain their rather odd discovery that the inflation of the universe is increasing in rapidity and that this increasingly rapid expansion began to occur only about 5 billion years ago in a universe that is now not quite 14 billion years old. This increasing inflation is an entropic phenomenon, the dissipation of the energy of the universe with the passing of time that will culminate in its demise. One might expect that entropy would occur in an expected, gradual fashion, like a spinning top slowly going to a wobble and eventually falling to its side, or an old-fashioned watch that finally stops as its wound mainspring gradually loses its tension. This strange discovery that the rate of entropy is increasing with time has led physicists to hypothesize the existence of what they have called "dark energy," the adjective in the designation a metaphor for our lack of precise knowledge about the workings of this kind of energy. In spite of these epistemic limitations, physicists have calculated that this entropic dark energy makes up as much as three-quarters of the matter-energy in the universe, which means that so much of what Christians call the created order is composed of forces moving it ever faster toward its death.⁸

William Stoeger has provided some striking examples of the fitfulness and unreliability of our solar system in an essay provocatively, albeit realistically, entitled "Scientific Accounts of Ultimate Catastrophes in Our Life-Bearing Universe." The universe, he affirms, "is life-bearing, and even seems to be specially ordered to produce life." "And yet, paradoxically," he counters:

at the same time death is also a pervasive experience throughout nature. In fact, it is only through the disappearance, disintegration, and death of structure, systems, and organisms that emergence and birth of others that are new and more advanced occur. From a distance these transitions sometimes seem gentle and automatic, but when we look at the details and the mechanisms, the large-scale and catastrophic nature of many of these events hits home.⁹

Stoeger has several such cosmic events in mind. Evidence suggests that much of life on Earth was destroyed and reconfigured by an asteroid 10 kilometers in diameter that struck the planet 65 million years ago in Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. Although events of such magnitude are statistically rare in our planetary history—occurring, it is estimated, every 100 million years—

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ On dark energy, see Evalyn Gates, *Einstein's Telescope: The Hunt for Dark Matter and Dark Energy in the Universe* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 196–224.

⁹ William R. Stoeger, S.J., "Scientific Accounts of Ultimate Catastrophes in our Life-Bearing Universe," in *The End of the World and the Ends of God: Science and Theology on Eschatology*, ed. J. Polkinghorne and M. Welker (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 20–21.

other more minor collisions that still have the potential for calamitous destruction happen in planetary history more frequently. For example, 1908 witnessed the atmospheric explosion of an asteroid 30-60 meters in diameter over an uninhabited region of northern Siberia. Had the explosion occurred over a metropolitan area, the loss of life and destruction would have been total in a blast area of 2,150 square kilometers.¹⁰ The planet remains vulnerable to such collisions, and planetary “near misses” by celestial rocks contingently on their way through our solar system are reported almost annually.

The behavior of our planet and of life on Earth reflects this same contingency. In the past generation we have become thankfully aware of how our own human actions since the dawn of the Industrial Age have poisoned our environment and threatened the existence of planetary life. But apart from our actions, the planet itself has often behaves in a manner hostile to life. The greatest mass extinction of life on the planet took place not 65 million years ago with the passing of the dinosaurs, but 250 million years ago at the end of the Permian era. It was caused by a prolonged period of planetary-scale volcanic eruptions, receding seas, the oxidation of carbon, and variation in global temperatures.¹¹

Closer to our temporal home, the variable confluence of natural forces that produce hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, drought, earthquakes, and tsunamis constantly claim lives that even over the course of a few years become uncountable. Contingency in the evolution of biological life occurs in the appearance of genetic mutation that gains a foothold in the struggle for life. That struggle on an evolutionary scale comes at the cost of the death of species, while the struggle for life in any quotidian moment comes at the cost of inter- and intra-specific death, so much of it an evolutionary consequence of the history of predation. Our consideration of all these negative effects of contingency should not overlook the ways that viral mutation ever brings about new diseases that beset our lives and all sentient life. We should acknowledge too the genetic probability we all face to a greater or lesser degree that the contingency of anomalous cell growth will produce cancers that compromise our health and possibly our lives.

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL REDUX

What I have just described in these last examples of the contingent behavior of nature is a certain segment of the human experience of evil, a word that we use to name our encounter with death and deathliness. Additionally, I have suggested that the contingent behavior of the natural world, which occasionally has what we judge to be an evil impact on our lives, seems to be woven into the order of creation, not as evil but as contingency that sometimes gives rise to natural events that we judge to be evil. Someone might object at this point that what I have described is simply the finitude of the natural world. The natural world, as finite, is not God and so, as finite, passes away. Why, the objection might go, would one portray finitude as evil? I am not suggesting that the material, physical world is evil. Such a position runs counter to the most basic Christian belief that the ontological order is good precisely because it is created by God who is Goodness itself. Yet, Christians have long claimed that certain encounters with a finite world that is metaphysically good may yet more specifically, as events, be judged evil, even if theologically they have tended to ignore this difficult side of the doctrine of creation. I also would like to observe that other religions have confronted the evidence of the death-dealing powers of the natural world in a way that Christianity has not: Gnosticism by judging matter

¹⁰ Ibid., 22.

¹¹ Ibid., 23.

itself to be evil; and the religions of ancient India, Hinduism and Buddhism, by affirming the illusory character of the universe itself. I am not suggesting that Christianity ought to consider these beliefs. I am proposing, though, that Christian theology would do well to address the problematic aspects of the created order that these religions face more directly in their core beliefs.

Notice too that I have not considered the innumerable ways that human behavior contributes to the evil that we meet in our lives and in history. Enacted volition that breaks relationship with God and the neighbor, what Christians call “sin,” overwhelms our lives, so much so that our tradition has developed the doctrine of original sin to give account of the inescapability of this evil of our own making. Here, though, in my exploration of the doctrine of creation, I do not wish to consider sin, the kind of evil that we do and for which we are responsible. Sin, it seems to me, is not difficult to explain theologically. The energy of sin in history may be mind-boggling. Sin’s pervasiveness in our lives may lead us to the brink of despair. The tragedy of sin unleashed to horrendous proportions may give us cause to doubt the goodness of humanity and its very future. And yet, since sin issues from created persons who possess the capacity for free choice, the distortion that this kind of evil brings to creation is only as difficult to explain as human pride, arrogance, selfishness, and vanity. On the other hand, evil stemming from certain behaviors of the universe presents remarkable difficulty to theological explanation. The universe is not a person and so does not possess free choice. God is the creator of the universe that sometimes behaves in a way that we judge to be evil. Theologically, then, our challenge is to explain God’s relationship to the contingent behavior of the created universe that spills out into human lives in ways that its victims judge to be evil. There have been several attempts to do so, and all of them have their problems. These problems, I propose, have a bearing on how we imagine and appreciate the sacramentality of the Christian worldview. Let us consider a few.

The most ancient attempt to explain the death-dealing powers of nature is the Christian doctrine that death itself, and so by implication all the ways that nature brings about death, is caused by human sin, in the sense that sin justly incurs the divine punishment of death. This legal explanation appears as early as Romans 5:12 where Paul claims that “sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned.” Paul continues this same causal explanation three chapters later, where he affirms, metaphorically, the longing of creation to be saved from the travail of sin: “for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it” (Rom 8:20). This position was influentially re-affirmed by Augustine and was embraced as authoritative doctrine in the mainline Christian traditions, undoubtedly because it solves the problem of the death-dealing powers of nature covenantally, by making death in any form the deserved consequence of sinful volition. Were this explanation not offered, the tradition fears, then God’s providence and the goodness of creation would be more than questionable.

Even though this explanation affirms the goodness of God and creation necessary for any Christian account, it presents multiple problems. First, it actually denies the existence of innocent suffering. All suffering, it insists, is guilty and deserved, a position that contradicts ordinary Christian judgment. Second, to invoke a practical litmus test for gospel truth, the claim that any death is the wages of sin “just doesn’t preach.” Any of us, I think, would be shocked to hear a homily at the funeral of a young child who succumbed to a natural illness in which the homilist invoked the shared guilt of the deceased and the grieving congregation to account for the premature death and all its emotional pain. The explanation would seem not only grossly

insensitive but also scandalously false. Whereas the doctrine of original sin strikes those with tragic moral responsibility in life as profoundly true, it does not seem to be true as a causal explanation for a death that issues from the conditions of the created order. Third, the traditional doctrine that sin causes the death-dealing powers of nature does not mesh well with our scientific knowledge of cosmic and planetary evolution. The traditional doctrine does make sense in a culture that imagined the appearance of sin in the universe very shortly after its six-day creation by God. But its intelligibility collapses in the face of the fact that human beings are astonishingly late arrivals in a universe whose behavior is unaffected by human absence or presence and on a planet in which death was already long rampant in the biological world from which humans evolved. If we tweaked the traditional doctrine to have it say that the precedence of death in the life-world causally anticipated the human sin that caused it, then we would be perilously close to a supralapsarian account of the fall that would be unacceptable in a Catholic frame of explanation.

A second attempt to negotiate the death-dealing powers of nature is offered by process theology. There is much variety in this style of theological interpretation, and process theologies address all sorts of concerns. Above all, though, process theologies find advantage in the judgment that God's being is in time precisely in order to resolve the traditional problem of God's relationship to the death-dealing forces of nature. Willing to relinquish the traditional doctrine of divine omnipotence, and with it the traditional doctrine of creation, process theologies typically assume the givenness of the universe along with the givenness of God, and represent a God whose providence is loving but limited and who wrestles with the death-dealing powers of the universe in many of the same ways intelligent creatures do. I do appreciate the many insights that process theologies have contributed to modern theology, but I think it an error to relinquish the traditional doctrine of divine omnipotence, itself a function of the belief that God is unchangeable. I do not think that we need be stodgy in our commitment to divine impassibility by making Platonic thought-forms a Procrustean bed to which our theologies must conform. And I think there are all sorts of ways a rather traditional doctrine of divine impassibility can accommodate theological efforts to appreciate the ways that any personal life, including God's, is emotionally moved. But the concerns of so many process theologies seem to me to be those of the philosophy of religion, bent on offering a theodicy that rationally justifies God in the face of evil. Such a "best-of-all-possible-gods" theodicy ends up trading God's saving and miraculous power over death for the intelligibility of a reconfigured God-world relationship.

A third attempt to negotiate the death-dealing powers of nature, the last I will consider and judge to be as deficient as the previous two, is what I call the "providential explanation." This explanation, often offered as well-meaning comfort by believers to believers in the midst of tragedy, finds God's mysterious purpose at work in the sort of evil that issues from the conditions of God's own creation. The providential explanation, as the consoling rhetoric of faith, is a popular rendition of the theological tradition's principal response to evil—that God permits evil in order to bring out of it a greater good.¹² But unlike that more theoretical axiom, the providential explanation is offered in very specific circumstances of tragedy as a hopeful testimony to the unity of God's omnipotence and love, and as an emotional sop to the legal rigor of the Pauline-based doctrine that death—any death—is God's just punishment for the universality of sin. The difficulty with the providential explanation is that in very many circumstances its offer of consolation has exactly the opposite effect than the comfort it intends,

¹² *ST*, III, q. 1, art. 3.

as the believer now must wrestle not only with the death at hand but also with the well-meaning but emotionally devastating affirmation of God's deathly agency.

GOD AND DEATH

Even if the providential explanation is a kind of comforting coda to the legal explanation, both are problematic negotiations of God's relation to the death-dealing power of nature because they both affirm that God does death. Let us reimagine the doctrine of creation, and with it creation's sacramentality, in light of a different premise—that God does not do death at all, in any way, neither as retribution nor as providence. When it comes to humans, no argument needs be made for a causal connection between death and our volition, yet God could only be blamed for humanly caused death if we in turn were to blame God for creating us as the freely-willing persons we are. When it comes to nature, though, we meet death-dealing powers for which human beings clearly are not responsible and for which, in principle, only God could be. This is precisely why the legal and providential explanations enter the field of theological discourse in the ways they do. Unlike process theology, they affirm God's omnipotence and understand it to serve God's uncompromising goodness. Thus, they assume that God is the author of both life and death, and regard God's authorship of death as either just (legal explanation) or mysteriously good (providential explanation). Finally, the Christian tradition affirms the truth of both explanations at once in spite of the difficulties that both present.

In an earlier work of mine entitled *God, Evil, and Innocent Suffering*, I have argued that we would do well theologically to remove all divine agency from death.¹³ I cannot rehearse the entire argument of that book here, but I can give you a sense of how I justify this view. Read from a Christian perspective, the narrative logic of Scripture is shaped by the divine promise that God will destroy death forever (Is 25:8; Rev 21:4), a promise that God has kept in God's resurrection of Jesus from the dead and that God, Christians believe, will keep in the eventful gift of their own resurrected life. If this promise, made and eschatologically kept by the living God, defines God's redemptive character, then placing God's actions at odds with this life-affirming promise by postulating God's agency in death introduces a strange contradiction in what should be the absolute unity of the divine will. This promise could consistently be made and enacted by God with respect to all the death that human persons do, since God is not responsible for this kind of deathliness. But it would be utterly inconsistent to affirm that God promises to destroy the kind of deathliness that issues from natural contingency, were this kind of deathliness ascribed to God's retributive or providential agency. This traditional imaginary places God in the odd position of gracefully promising to destroy a death of God's own making, a position that postulates a double will in God quite like the claims of a doctrine of double predestination which are utterly unacceptable to Catholic assumptions. I propose instead that we imagine God at odds with the power of death, much in the manner of the patristic dramatic model of redemption, and ever at work at keeping the biblical promise to destroy death forever.

My proposal is uncontroversial if the deathliness with which we imagine God to be at odds issues from the tragic history of human sin. My proposal becomes controversial at the very point that I affirm the theological advantage of imagining God bent on the destruction too of the death-dealing power of natural contingency, which is beyond both the will and responsibility of humanity and which could stand under God's omnipotent causal power but, I am suggesting,

¹³ John E. Thiel, *God, Evil, and Innocent Suffering: A Theological Reflection* (New York: Crossroad, 2002).

does not. There is, I am proposing, a dimension of God's good creation that persons encounter as an evil caused neither by human persons nor by the divine person. I am not suggesting that this evil in the theatre of creation that is caused neither by God nor by humanity is a "something." The metaphysical goodness of the created order is a most basic claim of Christian faith. There is no evil being and so I want to describe any evil, including the evil of the death-dealing power of nature, as a privation. Nor do I want to question God's omnipotence in my depiction of God's graceful confrontation with the death-dealing power of nature. As I have already noted, God's power over death is unlimited and the depth of that power is revealed in God's resurrection of Jesus from the dead, an event in which believers contemplate God's fulfillment of the divine promise to defeat death in their own lives. Yet I think there is a theological advantage in removing any kind of divine agency from death.

I am not alone in advocating a theological stance that is unwilling to place death under God's intention and enacted power. Edward Schillebeeckx has argued ardently for this view, as has James Allison.¹⁴ I have gone further than they, however, by maintaining that it is theologically unproductive to try to explain the origin of the death-dealing power of nature, since any explanation will end up either in the camp of the legal explanation or, for modern theologians far more likely, in the camp of the providential explanation, especially in a common theological form of it that sees death as an expression of God's creative power. These views, I believe, are unsatisfactory for all the reasons we have considered. Far better, I have argued, to place the inevitable, admitted ignorance that attends any theological proposal here at the point of accounting for the origin of death that does not issue from sinful human agency. The legal explanation faces ignorance in explaining how an obviously innocent death is yet guilty and deserved, while the providential explanation faces ignorance in explaining how God's good and purposeful will could be behind an event that enters someone's life so tragically and devastatingly. It would be theologically productive, I propose, to place ignorance, instead, at the point where other theologies would explain the origin of nature's death-dealing power while affirming the goodness and love of God in ever battling that power to fulfill the biblical promise to destroy death forever, as well as God's eschatological victory in this battle.

SACRAMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

What are the theological consequences of acknowledging this contingent behavior of God's good creation for the Christian sacramental worldview? As I hope I have made clear, answering this question does not involve finding some reasonable solution to the problem of evil. What I have proposed as our starting point is a theological *docta ignorantia* that resists explaining the origin of the sort of evil that appears in creation which does not issue from human agency and over which, I have proposed, God's divine omnipotence too exercises no causative power, even though God's providence ever engages it. The sacramentality of the Christian worldview yet must take account of the contingency of creation in its vision of God's communication of grace in and through material existence.

As Brian Robinette has recently reminded us, the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is not an explanation of how the universe came to be but an affirmation about the sort of world that Christians believe creation to be—one that God has willed into being gratuitously through God's

¹⁴ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. J. Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 724–839; James Alison, *The Recovery of Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1996).

redeeming love. Best conceived as a “doctrine of hope for creation,” *creatio ex nihilo* is “a soteriologically motivated doctrine that declares the penultimacy of evil, sin, and innocent suffering.”¹⁵ And, to the degree that the doctrine of creation is understood not as speculation about the beginnings of worldly existence but as a soteriological doctrine, it expresses, Robinette observes, “something fundamental about how God continuously relates to creation...[allowing] us to say that ‘nothing’ keeps God from being present to creation in all its contingency and ambiguity.”¹⁶ If Robinette is correct in this judgment, and he certainly is, then we have surer ground for our earlier claim that, though the doctrine of creation is the language of sacramentality, the doctrine of the Incarnation is its grammar. We are, I believe, theologically obliged to interpret the doctrine of creation through the truth of the Johannine Prologue: that the universe was created through and in the eternal Word (Jn 1:3), the same Word who embraced creation in an act of divine love by becoming flesh (Jn 1:14) and who embraced creation in all its contingency and its goodness alike.

No doctrine expresses the providential presence of God to a created world rife with tragic power more than the doctrine of the Incarnation. In this regard, the Incarnation, not only as doctrine but also, and more importantly, as event guides us in addressing the problem of created contingency, for in the Incarnation God reveals God’s own response to the tragic power that courses through God’s good creation. In the Incarnation, the very being of God embraces the universe in an extraordinary act of divine providence that places God’s very being in intimate sacramental relationship with all of creation, a testimony to the breadth of God’s providential presence that can sometimes be obscured by our customary Christological accents.

The compelling Cappadocian response to the Apollinarian controversy of the late fourth century, which was later sanctioned in the orthodox teaching of Chalcedon, sometimes leads us to emphasize too exclusively the personalistic dimensions of the Incarnation and so to forget that the Incarnation too expresses a sublime truth about God’s profound presence to the non-personal dimensions of creation and all of its contingency. In opposition to Apollinarius’ monophysitism, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzus formulated the Christological rule of faith that “what is not assumed, is not saved,” insisting that in the Incarnation the divine logos embraced human nature in its completeness—body and human soul—so that human persons might be saved by this sacramental engagement of the human and divine.¹⁷

The Cappadocians were correct, of course, to insist that the human person is indeed at the center of God’s saving drama in the theater of creation. And yet, this sacramental engagement of the divine and the human does not occur at the expense of the physical universe which was assumed by the divine nature in and through the Savior’s physical body. This often overlooked dimension of the Incarnation, witnessed in the earliest cosmic christologies of the New Testament,¹⁸ testifies to God’s extraordinary presence to the non-personal dimensions of creation, indeed nearly all of it. This good creation, whose behavior sometimes enters human lives with tragic effect, was itself brought into incarnational relationship with God’s own graceful nature so that it shares in the same redemption with which human creatures were graced,

¹⁵ Brian D. Robinette, “The Difference Nothing Makes: *Creatio ex nihilo*, Resurrection, and Divine Gratuity,” *Theological Studies* 72 (2011): 525–57, at 555.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 556.

¹⁷ For example, Gregory of Nazianzus, “To Cledonius Against Apollinaris (Epistle 101),” in *Christology of the Later Fathers* (Library of Christian Classics), ed. E.R. Hardy (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), 215–24.

¹⁸ For example, 2 Cor 5:17; Col 1:15–20.

in spite of their sin. There is no sin in God's non-personal creation, since in that realm there is no volition that wills sin and so no responsibility for it. Yet, the destinies of humanity and all of creation are entwined in God's redemptive plan. To the degree that humanity encounters the tragic power of creation as suffering from which it seeks redemption, it is theologically important to stress creation's sharing in humanity's own need for redemption while yet acknowledging that humanity's responsibility for sin does not extend to the tragic power of creation. The Incarnation testifies to God's profound, soteriological presence to all the deathliness that plagues creation. This presence is neither a distant sympathy nor a powerless witness but a presence confirmed by God's eschatological promise to make us sharers in Jesus' resurrection from the dead, God's consummate response to sin, to the deathliness that it does cause, and to the non-volitional deathliness that appears in the created order.

Paul's hope for a "new creation" might be an effective theological avenue to pursue in imagining God's redemption of a universe marred by sinful perfidy but also by the innocent suffering that besets human persons through the tragic power of creation. Even though Paul could anticipate redemption personalistically in his hope that "[j]ust as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven" (1 Cor 15:49), he did not do so to the exclusion of a redemptive vision of an entirely transformed new creation in which God would finally be "all in all" (1 Cor 15:28). This sweeping eschatological metaphor is thoroughly sacramental, because only the invisible grace of God at work in and through the material things of God's good creation could be capable of bringing about the miraculous transformation of all that is and that stands in such dire need. Perhaps with Paul we may imagine creation itself sharing in Christ's resurrection, being saved from the powers of death that beset it (Rom 8:20), and yet part company with Paul in finally blaming ourselves for the non-volitional, deathly contingency that ravages the created order.

The traditional Anselmian theology of redemption might be another resource in appreciating how a Catholic sacramental imagination might account for natural contingency. The traditional model of atonement sees the cross as the site of a sacrificial exchange for the divine retribution that human persons have sinfully incurred. It places God's retributive causality behind creation's tragic power and even God's will, however loving, behind the death of the Son on the cross. Yet, the logic of Anselm's account of atonement is thoroughly incarnational. Human nature was obliged to offer satisfaction to God for sin, but could not; only the divine nature could, but need not; hence the reasonableness of God's plan to save the world by becoming human.¹⁹ The traditional satisfaction model of atonement is a time-honored belief that has been criticized in recent theology for the ways in which its insistence that suffering is the path to salvation might be misappropriated in the actual circumstances of people's lives. Perhaps, though, we could renew our appreciation for the Anselmian model were we to highlight its profound expression of divine immanence to the frailty of human life and, through the unimaginable bodily suffering of the Savior on the cross, to the frailty of all creation, which, unlike us but not because of us, stands in need of redemption through no fault of its own.

As a third and final illustration, we can extend this theological thought experiment to the sacraments themselves, which in their materiality bring the contingency of creation into intimate, saving engagement with the power of sacramental grace. Baptism and the Eucharist may serve as examples. Paul's earliest explanation of baptism's efficacy has what the later tradition called the

¹⁹ Anselm of Canterbury, *Why God Became Man*, in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham* (Library of Christian Classics), trans. E.R. Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 150–51.

“matter” of the sacrament symbolize the death of Christ, into which the initiate is ritualistically submerged:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so too we might walk in newness of life (Rom 6:3–4).

Thus, for Paul, the graceful power of the sacrament utterly embraces the deathliness before which we and all creation stand in need, even to the point that the watery dimensions of creation symbolize the death of Christ in which we must share in order also to share in Christ’s resurrected life. Appreciating the one narrative of *scriptura tota*, perhaps we could associate Paul’s interpretation of the waters of baptism with the waters of the chaotic void that the Spirit of God providentially caresses in the opening lines of Genesis even before God begins to speak the creative words that tame them. So understood, the waters of baptism might be taken to symbolize too the contingency of creation present in the world before human persons even appear in the created order and that is powerfully represented in the matter of the sacrament through which the invisible grace of Christian initiation is palpably communicated.²⁰ Through the matter of the sacrament, grace heals not just our deathliness but all deathliness, even that deathliness that productively eludes our theological explanation.

In a similar manner, the bread and wine of the Eucharistic meal, the created dust of the earth and, to our wondrous benefit, the staples of bodily life, are miraculously transformed into Jesus’ own body and blood, the very body that was broken and the very blood that was spilled in the Savior’s physical suffering. That Jesus’ passion and death were caused by the violence of human sin is not only a Christian belief but also a fact of history. And yet, we might imagine the contingent powers of creation present to his person in the fragility of his physical self, as created no different from our own physical selves, so utterly susceptible to the suffering and death that issues from the evil actions of humankind and the contingent behavior of the natural world. In this regard, the event of transubstantiation does not mitigate the contingency of creation but heightens it, since the bread and wine become the body and blood of the one who suffered a terrible passion and the brutality of death on a cross. And yet, in a manner analogous to the unity of natures in the one person of the Savior, the grace of the sacrament of the Eucharist is the gift of God’s healing presence communicated in the materiality of a human body that, like all human bodies, remains so vulnerable to the deathliness for which no person, divine or human, is responsible.

As Catholics, we are sometimes inclined to see the doctrine of creation as requiring less of a leap of faith than so many of the other doctrines we believe. Perhaps our traditional appreciation for Vatican I’s teaching that God can be “known with certainty from the things that have been made, by the natural light of human reason”²¹ and the importance of natural law to Catholic moral reasoning shape our theological judgment that the doctrine of creation requires a less strenuous act of faith than do the sublime mysteries that we could not know apart from divine revelation. I hope I have given us cause to consider that the doctrine of creation presents as much of a challenge as the most profound mysteries of our faith, and that what we call the

²⁰ On this reading of the opening lines of Genesis, see Jon Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

²¹ “Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, Canon II, 1,” in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, ed. N.P. Tanner, S.J. (Washington: Georgetown University, 1990), 810.

Catholic tradition's sacramental worldview, itself a function of the doctrine of creation, continues to be a site for theological reflection in ways we have not considered enough.

In a fine article entitled "The Catholic Sacramental Imagination and the Access/Excess of Grace," Anthony Godzieba notes that sacraments and sacramentality "bespeak presence, gift, and fullness of grace running over" and that the Catholic sacramental imagination properly affirms that "all aspects of created being can mediate grace."²² The Christian tradition's sacramental worldview does indeed offer the believer a beautiful aesthetic of God's providential economy in and through the created order. But as believers, and particularly as theologians, we need to appreciate Godzieba's insistence that our Catholic imagination contemplate how *all* aspects of created being can mediate grace. We should not forget, ignore, or deny the troubling dimensions of creation in the face of which this sacramental aesthetic manifests its eschatological and uniquely incarnational resonance, reminding us of all creation's need and enabling us to appreciate God's loving omnipresence to all the suffering and to all the contingency in the depths of creation's sacramentality.

²² Anthony J. Godzieba, "The Catholic Sacramental Imagination and the Access/Excess of Grace," *New Theology Review* 21 (2008): 14–26, at 15, 21.