MAN IN THE COSMOS | I

MARTIN LUTHER, IN THIS SMALL CATECHISM, *BEGINS HIS* explanation of the first article of the Creed: "I believe that God has created *me*." And we may well ask: Isn't this an odd way to begin to talk about the whole creation? Considering the vastness of the creation of all things, why shouldn't something more sensible have occurred to the Reformer than to talk about man, this very late though highly developed and already decadent "mammal"? Isn't this another evidence of man's incurable vanity, which is constantly betraying him into imagining that he is the center of the universe and taking himself so utterly seriously, even in the midst of and despite protestations of Christian humility? Nietzsche once said of this arrogance of man: "What is the vanity of the vainest of men compared with the vanity possessed by the most modest in 'feeling that he is a human being' in nature and the world"; in other words, in claiming that he has a special role in the rest of the cosmos?

In order, then, to get behind what Luther intended in beginning his teaching about creation with this very strange and striking phrase: "I believe that God created me," let us ask ourselves quite simply how *we,* we so-called "modern" people, would begin to explain to a friend or to our children what is meant and what is implied when we say that "God created the world," and that therefore the world is a *creation.*

If we had this task, we would probably see two possibilities of making belief in creation somewhat plausible to our children, or our pupils, or our friends.

1. *THE INFINITY OF THE WORLD IN TIME*

We could start out by saying that somewhere at the very beginning, where the endless succession of creatures is lost in the dark reaches of primordial beginnings, there is *God*. We are normally quite willing to accept some such initial beginning. It is the kind of construction we need for our thinking, a kind of scientific hypothesis, which we are simply *obliged* to set up. True, we do not have to call this first beginning "God," but can, if we want to be somewhat more matter-of-fact and less emotional, simply call it the "first cause." Adalbert Stifter once said that to believe in God means to be convinced that the endless chain of causality ends finally in the hands of God.

This view is usually called "deism" and what it affirms is that God is like a watchmaker who has constructed a clock, set it going, and then lets it go on running without concerning himself about it any further. This view constitutes one type of belief in evolution, a belief that, roughly and briefly stated, says something like this:

In accord with the law of cause and effect, every phenomenon is caused by an antecedent phenomenon. For example, man is the effect of prehuman animal forms (whether these were apes is of no importance at this point). These animal forms in turn are the result of more primitive forms until we finally get back to the one-celled animals. Then on the farthest horizon of development in the past, we may assume an original gaseous state which had to condense and form the most primitive phenomena of nature.

It is of the very nature of such an evolutionary series that it should be endless both forward and backward. But even the original gaseous state prompts us to ask: Who or what was its cause? The very thought of this unending series is painful to the human mind and is borne only with difficulty. Therefore the mind puts a stop, as it were, to this ever-continuing line of development by setting an ultimate starting point, which it then may or may not call "God." This God would then be the first beginning, or as Aristotle called him, the "prime mover." In so far as one con-

ceives of this prime mover as having some kind of "personal" power, one can call him the Creator.

Undoubtedly this is an impressive view. We see the "infinity of the world in time" spread out before us. And yet this infinity flows from and is finally caught up in the hands of God—hands which we see in our mind's eye mysteriously shining at the beginning of all things, as our thoughts, stretched to their farthest limits, grope ceaselessly backward to the primordial dawn; hands which, because they brought everything into being, are still creatively and sovereignly at work in all that is happening now.

But here, despite the impressiveness of this grand view of the world, we are compelled to ask some fundamental questions. What significance does man have in this view? And growing out of this, what meaning does this view have for our own life in concrete terms? What can it give us in the way of purpose and a meaningful goal?

Asking these questions, we find out two things. First, in this infinite realm man is a very late point, which is separated from those hands of God by a stupendous series of preceding phenomena. And second, he is really *nothing more* than a point, a fleeting minute in cosmic time, a minute which will vanish without a sound when it is past as eternal silence falls upon its forgotten grave. Nietzsche, whose thinking was dominated by this idea of evolution, saw this futility and nothingness of man with unusual clarity. Therefore he felt that man's assuming to himself any unique position in the cosmos was simply absurd and grotesque vanity.

Nietzsche, acting in thorough consistency with this belief in development, never wearied of stressing this *momentary* character of human existence. He speaks of inorganic, *dead* nature as being the real nature and says that it is a "boundless process of becoming, without any delusions," and within this eternal succession organic points emerge or rather flash up for a moment. "The drops of life in the world are of no significance for the total character of the vast ocean of becoming and passing away." "Life on earth is a moment, an incident, an exception without a consequence." Before and after it there broods only the silence of primeval time and the silence of the time of the End. And even

within these brief moments the time of *human* life itself is only a tiny atom of time. "Man is a small eccentric species of animal that has its time."

So there is nothing specifically "human." Man is almost nothing, an atom floating completely lost in infinity along with the whole long line of his generations, from the days of his original ancestors. (Within this tiny space of time how much tinier is the life of an *individual* man!)

And now a cold chill comes over us, whereas at first we were inclined to find this view of the world so impressive. In the light of this world view our life looks like this: Our love for one another, the sufferings of the great war, Goethe's *Faust,* Michelangelo's sculptures, Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony,* Bach's *St. Matthew Passion,* the joy of a man standing on some alpine peak, the high courage to die for an idea, the love of a mother for her child, the creative devotion of a great scientist—all of them nothing more than an unsubstantial drop in a ghastly, gigantic ocean, nothing but a feckless, puling peep between two icy zones of silence. Hardly born, and already forgotten and engulfed in nothingness: *is this the meaning of our life?*

But that is what it *must* be, if this view of the world is correct. And Nietzsche then proceeds to draw the consequences of this view with all the heroic coldness and despairing courage that characterize his thinking.

Starting from this point of view, he says, I fulfill my life when I accept and affirm its transience, its swift and fleeting evanescence and reabsorption into inorganic nature; when I make up my mind to abandon any hope or claim upon eternity in my life and embrace its nothingness. Then ultimately the meaning and fulfillment of my life consist in affirming its meaninglessness and accepting the nothingness of Mephistopheles' "eternal emptiness." "To be released from life and become dead again can be a happy thing." "We become utterly truthful . . . death must be reinterpreted! In this way we reconcile ourselves with what is real, that is, with the dead world." This, then, would be the meaning of life—to affirm and accept the nothingness in which our tiny bit of human life with its little leaping flame of idealism is set. So the last word of the world view based upon this idea of develop-

ment, this belief in the infinity of time, is this: *first,* the ultimate futility of human life; *second,* its transitional character, with no significance of its own; and *finally,* one's personal acceptance of nothingness. And at the same time we see how absolutely unimportant it is whether we give this belief in development a religious foundation, as deism does, by calling the ultimate cause "God," or whether we follow Nietzsche and allow the development to end in the unknowable silence of primordial time.

So we are confronted with a completely negative end result, an absolute, unconditional devaluation of life, the utter bleakness of which can hardly be covered by the contrived phantom of the "superman." Anybody who really knows Nietzsche knows what that means. There is a tendency today whenever Nietzsche is quoted to put forward only one side of his thought, the seemingly bright side about propagating the human race upward and the shining goal of attaining the superman. It is important therefore to show the other and less well-known side, the bleak backdrop of his thought, in front of which these shining phantoms and dreams appear in order to brighten and glorify its deadly darkness.

Recall once more the starting point of our train of thought. We began by asking how we might explain to modern man our faith in creation, and we attempted to do this by thinking of God the Creator as the original beginning of the evolution of creatures. We have seen that this belief in development ends in nihilism, the absolute futility of human existence, and we cannot avoid recognizing that here the road that leads to any real faith in the Creator and the knowledge of our human creatureliness is blocked.

2. *THE INFINITY OF THE WORLD IN SPACE*

There is, however, another possibility which seems to present itself to us as a way of communicating this faith in creation to modern man. It, too, should be examined. We have been speaking about the infinity of the world in *time*; perhaps the infinity of the world in *space* may be more impressive.

And the fact is that many books on religion and even more

teachers of religion prefer to begin with the infinity of the world of the stars in order to illustrate the unfathomable glory and infinity of the Creator God.

Think for a moment of just one example, which may illustrate the infinity of space. Several years ago, by means of the most powerful astronomic telescope there was discovered a faint half-moon-like nebula which indicated the existence of a whole new universe.

It was formerly thought that the Milky Way, to which our solar system and our small planets belong, was the only existent universe. But now we know that there are not only thousands of individual stars but also thousands of complete universes in the universe. This universe is 500 million light years away and—what is equally prodigious—it is moving away from us at a speed of 80,000 kilometers per second—as are the other universes, too. One therefore has the impression that the total universe is expanding every second in an utterly appalling way. Naturally, we can have no adequate conception of this speed; it is so rapid that one could round the earth one and a half times between two pulse beats. In its tremendous flight away from our range of vision this may have been our last opportunity to catch sight of this new universe; otherwise we might never have known about it at all. And how many other universes there may still be behind it in the infinity of cosmic distance, universes which humanity in the brief seconds of its existence will never see or even suspect!

Such thoughts—far as they may seem to take us away from the subject of our question—should give us a vivid impression of this infinity of space and at the same time help us to understand why the human spirit, and especially the *religious* spirit, has always looked up into the cosmic distances of the firmament in order to find an illustration of the eternity and infinity of God. The Holy Scriptures do this too, of course; but they do so in a way that carries a completely new undertone. In any case, they are referring to this upward look into the firmament when they reverently speak of him who "gives songs in the night" (Job 35:10).

The sight of the stars has always, as long as men have existed and long before the modern concept of infinity was formed, led to religious veneration. For in this upward look humanity gained

a sense of something greater than man; because we lifted our eyes to the stars, many a care, many a quarrel, which might have swelled all out of proportion because they were so close to our feelings or our daily life, have been reduced to their proper significance and have suddenly become very small and petty things.

And here again we put the question: What does this infinity mean for *man,* what does it mean, quite simply, for us *personally* and for our *life*?

Let me answer that question by simply asking another question: If we ask what this means "for us personally," isn't the answer exactly the same as in the case of the infinity of time? There the life of man is only a microscopic particle of time. Here the life of man is a mere atom, subject to the same futility in the face of the infinity of space as it is over against the infinity of time.

If, just for a moment, we really take this infinity in utter seriousness, do we not lose all conception of our own life, of all that is great and heroic and noble, and also of all that is small and nasty and base? In view of these cosmic dimensions does this distinction have any significance at all? Or, to use another simile, when we think of World War II and the mass misery in scores of ruined cities, does it make any difference at all whether yesterday two bees on the island of Capri fought over one of the millions of flowers there, and one of them sprained its sixth leg in the fray, or whether the two of them remembered that bees must stick together and harmoniously share the flowers? It is completely unimportant, isn't it?

But if that is so, isn't it equally unimportant, or even much less important, whether we human beings are great and noble in our life or whether we behave meanly and basely? So, does not the infinity of space pitch us even more radically into utter futility? Does not this utter nothingness extinguish, not only the little things, but also the greatness in our life?

This we must get clear in our minds, if we are not only to be thrilled but also appalled by the grandeur of space and the light years—if it is true that the immensity of light years really constitutes the ultimate background of this world, cutting off our vision of anything beyond it.

If we can quote Nietzsche for the infinity of time and its ter-

rors, we can quote Kant for the infinity of space. At the end of his *Critique of Practical Reason* he breaks out in these famous words: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and the more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within."

What this statement means is this: The sight of the starry heavens teaches me my own littleness and that which is greater than I. But this sense of the tremendous magnitude of the cosmos would be so overwhelming that I would be utterly shattered if there were not one thing that I could oppose to this infinity, namely, the moral law within me. This moral law tells me that I am a free, moral being. And this, despite my utter smallness, distinguishes me fundamentally from the starry heavens, be they never so gigantic. For these constellations must run their courses in accord with eternal, immutable laws and therefore are not free, but rather imprisoned in the unalterable cosmic curves of their orbits. And therefore I can contemplate them as a free being, infinitely superior to them all.

We shall see later that this self-assertion over against the infinity of the universe has its source in a Christian and Western heritage. What interests us at this point is just the fact that for Kant the infinity of cosmic space is tolerable only because the starry heavens are balanced by the moral law. The starry heavens alone would be dreadful.

At any rate, this much we now understand: It would be simply terrifying, we would be helplessly exposed to the awful loneliness of a chilling infinity, if we had to draw our faith in God the Creator from this concept and experience of space: "I believe that God has created the world; I believe that his arms embrace the far reaches of the light years and therefore last of all—for I am the least and smallest of all—they include *me*."

If that were so, would we not have to go on and say something like this? "I believe, O God, that you must first govern and direct the Milky Way, so that there shall be no cosmic collisions and catastrophes; and if you have a lot of time on your hands, Creator God, you may perhaps give some attention to our planet. And there at best you may be concerned about a few microscopically small so-called 'great nations' among the antlike children of

men, perhaps even the handful of earth that is called the West—but what about me? No, it would be grotesque even to think of such a thing, to assume that you could have any interest in me. This could be imagined only by an old book like the Bible, which suffers from a confusion of proportions and has no conception of the ridiculous rank man holds in the whole of the universe."

In concluding this train of thought concerning the infinity of time and space, we ask ourselves two questions:

1. Would not such a Creator God be cold and forbidding? Would he have any relationship whatsoever to him whom I may call my *Father,* because Jesus told us so? No, this God would certainly have nothing in common with a father; he would have become instead an impersonal cosmic formula, and in that formula my life with its sorrow and joy, its guilt and its high endeavors, its love of life and its fear of death, would only be an *X* or even that appalling cipher "infinite minus."

2. Is the Bible really so naïve that it puts man at the center and thus gives him an infinite importance, thus showing that it has no conception of the microscopical minuteness of his existence?

Three times in the Bible (Ps. 8:4; Heb. 2:6-9; and Ps. 144:3) we hear this cry: "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" And that, after all, means quite simply: No man of himself can claim—indeed, no man could ever arrive in a natural way at the idea—that he, that all of us together, were anything upon which the Creator could reasonably bestow his interest. In any case, in this repeated cry the Bible undoubtedly shows that it has more sense of the proportion of greatness between God and man than many people in our time, who say on the one hand that we Christians take ourselves too seriously when we bother God with our personal affairs and even our daily bread, and then turn around and say that one should not grovel and bow before God, but rather stand up before him—almost like an equal partner.

When the Bible poses the question "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" it knows very well that there is a decisive proportion of greatness between God and man. But it sets it forth not with the undertone of despair (as does modern man despite his assurances to the contrary), but rather with the tone of utter

amazement—that God should *nevertheless* be mindful of man! *Why* the Bible does this—well, the content of the gospel is meant to tell us why. Here we simply note the fact as such.

This same mystery, the "Christian" mystery, to which the Psalmist is pointing, is also expressed in that touching children's hymn,

> Do you know how many stars
> There are shining in the sky?

This song of the many, many stars in the sky is not intended to make the child conscious of how small and stupid he is within this great world. No, it tells him in simple, moving terms that even though and just because God holds all the millions of stars in his hand, he also knows him and loves him.

Do we understand, then, why it is such a liberation to hear Luther begin his explanation, *not* with light years and dizzying thought of space, but rather with the simple statement, "I believe that God has created *me*"?

Now we can sum up briefly everything that is expressed in that simple, succinct statement:

1. It says that the eternal God in all his unfathomable majesty, enthroned beyond all space and time, *knows* me and has called me by my name. Now the accent of infinity lies upon my life. Now I can say: I am his *child* and therefore I stand infinitely closer to him than all the "great possessions" of the universe and all its Milky Ways.

2. I, man, can say "Thou" to God; I can address him as "my Father, our Father." I am therefore not one of the infinite effects produced by the cause called God, but rather he is my Father. More precisely stated, I am related to God not as effect to cause, but rather as person to person. So when I say "Abba! Father!" something far more and quite other is happening than what Kant calls the moral law. Because I can say this word of prayer, I can not only face the whole cosmos in all its grandeur—I, the child of God, whom all the cosmic spaces and the mighty planets cannot harm, the child of God whom the "sun shall not smite by day nor the moon by night"; I can also reach out my hand to him through all infinite space, and he sees it and grasps it. In the

midst of "brother spheres in rival song" and the sun's resounding "thunder,"[1] I can lift up my tiny childish voice, I can bring to him my joy, my sorrow, everything, and he hears that voice through all the cosmic music of the spheres.

3. And this already suggests our third point: In the midst of this tremendous cosmic empire which is subject to the Creator God, I can have a relationship to him that makes me "directly subject to the King." Before God, I, man, am not merely a citizen of my country, not merely a child of my parents, not merely the bearer of certain more or less valuable attributes and capacities, but rather, without the interposition of any higher courts of appeal whatsoever, I am directly and solely responsible to him. Without any intermediation I can approach him; for him I am his child. And I am his child even when, and precisely when, every other court spurns me, when for every earthly court I no longer represent a value, even if I am only a feeble-minded waif whom human pride regards as a burden and treats as such or relegates to an institution. Even then I am still his child and despite what men may say I can call upon him and know that his hand is there.

This immediacy to the King was given to me by Jesus Christ, for it was he who gave me back my Father; it was he who brought me to the Father. And that's how faith in the Creator brings us to the very heart of the gospel.

To sum up, God is our Father and we are his children. We have immediate access to him, in spite of all the light-year spaces and all man's courts of appeal. All this is what Luther meant when he framed that audacious opening sentence of his explanation of creation:

"I believe that God has created me."

[1] Goethe, *Faust*, Prologue in Heaven. (Trans.)