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A Meditation

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Let's begin with a non-scientific question: Why is there something rather than nothing? It's a fairly basic question, but some scientific atheists seem to regard it as an idle question on the grounds that it is not a scientific question. I should say immediately that this is not an anti-scientific article – quite the opposite in fact. I believe that science has a great deal to say to the believer, since the scientist, even when an unbeliever, is talking about the world which Christians regard as God's creation. There is a powerful argument against divine creation that should be carefully and respectfully considered: how does one justify one's faith in God the Creator, considering the existence of so much innocent suffering in the world. This is one of the chief reasons why many people refuse to believe in God. A good God, they claim, would never bring into existence a world such as ours with its long record of innocent suffering inflicted by not only human action, but also by the physical universe.

The distinguished critic, Philip Toynbee, made this point some years ago with a concrete instance of innocent suffering that sears the imagination. He chose the example of a family of three who die in an earthquake. The father dies instantly. The mother dies 'in noisy anguish' during the next twenty-four hours. The child, uninjured, is pinned down between the dead and putrifying bodies of his parents, and dies slowly of thirst during the next five days. This shocking scene is carefully chosen: No human being is responsibly involved. The earthquake is a natural occurrence that takes place in the world created by God. Toynbee, who relates the story, advances a thesis which stands four-square in the path of any believer who attempts a rational justification of this terrible scene. Toynbee's case is a blunt denial that there is any possible justification for what has happened to this family: 'it is among our sharpest moral perceptions that not even the most superb end can justify such means as the killing of this child in those circumstances', he says. This impressive assertion needs to be given full and sympathetic attention.

Gabriel Daly is an Augustinian priest. Address: St. Augustine's, Taylor's Lane, Ballyboden, Dublin 16.

From a purely rational standpoint there is no convincing human argument against Toynbee's case. For the believer, guided by divine revelation, there is only one answer, and it is a radical act of faith expressing itself as an absolute trust in God the Creator and calling for the belief that God has reasons that vastly exceed our limited reason. Only a heroic and profound act of faith and trust can defy the challenge laid down by Toynbee. That act flies in the face of the rational morality put forward by Toynbee and others, and it claims that God has reasons that are hidden from us today and in this specific stage in creation. This looks like very special pleading, and it is important that we face the argument courageously before we make our act of trust in full awareness of the case against doing so. It means that our faith and trust in God are given against all reasonable moral arguments, and are based on the total handing over of our judgement to God for no other reason than that God is God. This may look like fideism, which dispenses with reason altogether. However, in this case it is supremely rational to hand over one's moral judgement to a God whom one believes to be all-knowing and infinitely just. We are called on to believe that there exists a realm where our human moral arguments are limited and transcended by the vision of a divine Creator planning a universe which will develop slowly and intricately over a huge expanse of time.

ABRAHAM AND ISAAC

There is one classical biblical instance in which Abraham is depicted as our father in faith. We can see the reason why, when we read chapter 22 of the Book of Genesis with its account of the sacrifice of Isaac, Abraham's much-loved son. There is a chilling starkness about what God tells Abraham to do: 'Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering' (Gen. 22: 2).

A teacher who discusses this story with her or his pupils will have an interesting class and will probably find that most of them will say that God was wrong to order him to kill his son, and Abraham was wrong in being ready to kill Isaac at God's command. The teacher, who in fact may share the opinion of the pupils, will be hard put to argue the case for Abraham's obedience and perhaps for God's reason for testing him. In the event, there is a happy ending, but that makes no difference to the theological and moral implications of the story. Regardless of how the discussion may go, the nature of faith will have been thoroughly examined as a result of it. Into the bargain, there may of course also be a debate about the existence of God. Remember we are dealing with the deepest and most basic act of trust we can be asked to make. It

has been called ‘a leap of faith’, by means of which the Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard tried to get beyond the aesthetic and the ethical levels to an act of pure faith and trust in God. Abraham was tested by what Kierkegaard called the need for a ‘leap of faith’ which would take him beyond ethics (killing Isaac would have been wrong) to absolute trust in God (obeying God even against one’s ethical convictions).

Is God above morality or indifferent to our consciences? Could it ever be right for God to command us to act against our conscience? These are questions that should lead to a lively discussion among older pupils. They may also disturb the teacher’s faith. This is a moment when any insincerity on the part to the teacher will be instantly detected by the pupils. Confession of doubt by the teacher will do far more good than a dishonest profession of unclouded faith. (This might also be a good time to examine the story of Job.)

‘COSMIC RELIGIOUS FEELING’

Albert Einstein was often described as an atheist, and it irritated him. ‘I believe’ he wrote, ‘in Spinoza’s God, who reveals Himself in the lawful harmony of the world, not in a God Who concerns Himself with the fate and the doings of mankind.’ (Baruch Spinoza, a 17th century philosopher adopted the motto *Deus sive Natura* to represent his identification of God and nature in a radically pantheistic profession of faith.)

> I do not believe in a personal God and I have never denied this but have expressed it clearly. If something is in me which can be called religious then it is the unbounded admiration for the structure of the world so far as our science can reveal it.

Einstein made it very clear that he did not believe in the God of revelation, a personal God who addresses human beings and enters into a grace-filled relationship with them. As a scientist of towering distinction Einstein thought long and hard about the universe, its sheer immensity, its laws, its complexity and its awe-inspiring beauty. He regarded the feeling of awe which often comes upon those who contemplate the enormity and complexity of the cosmos as ‘cosmic religious feeling’. He quotes a contemporary of his who said, with pardonable exaggeration, that ‘in this materialistic age of ours the serious scientific workers are the only profoundly religious people’. Believers in historical revelation may be offended by this hyperbole; yet it makes a valuable contribution to the relationship between science and religion. Moreover, it suggests something that science can credibly say to some believers: your God is too small!

This is roughly what Einstein meant when he expressed his dislike for revealed religion.

He once expressed his distaste for quantum mechanics with a famous remark: 'God does not play dice with the universe'. Some scientists were anxious lest this remark be taken to mean that Einstein was professing belief in a personal God – which would be unthinkable to them. He had already made it perfectly clear that he did not believe in a personal God. It was quite plain that what he meant by his remark was a protest against the seeming illogicality of quantum thought which threatened his own cosmic logic and security. Some believers could respond to him that actually it can be argued that God does play dice very thoughtfully and delicately by a dialectic of chance and necessity in creation; but that is another story.

OUR IMAGE OF GOD

In responding to God who is revealed as a loving Father, Christians can easily domesticate their God, losing sight of God's immensity, incomprehensibility and transcendent majesty. Christians need to be aware of what we do not know about God, which, as Thomas Aquinas has reminded us, vastly exceeds what we do know. It is all too easy to tame our God and make God just another presence, however exalted, in the world. Medieval theologians often presented God as a monarch, and this image became widespread and is still present in the church's liturgy. It is not a good image of God because it may disguise divine transcendence and make God's presence too falsely available. Furthermore, human kings are often tyrants, and this is patently unsuitable as an image of God. The image of 'Father', the holiest representation of God, can be sentimentalised into a domesticated paterfamilias. When we use the model 'Father' it is because that was how Jesus described Yahweh and taught his followers to do the same. The Jews were very sensitive about God's name, and they strove always to express it with great reverence. God's self-description in the Bible, 'I will be what I will be' (Exodus,3:14), is deliberately vague and discourages too easy a nomination of a title for God. (It sometimes seems that God does not wish to be found too easily.)

Modern Christians can recover the Hebrew awe for God's name by contemplating what Einstein called his own unbounded admiration for the splendour of creation. From there it is a short step to the splendour of its Creator. Perhaps the best service that science can provide for religion is to remind us of the enormity and complexity of the universe and what it reveals about its Creator. Imaginative contemplation of the majesty of creation can help us experience what Einstein called 'cosmic religious feeling'. We can

address our God as Father, because Jesus has told us that we can, as a mutually loving relationship. It is a permission that is given to us as a sublime and totally undeserved concession, the very essence of grace, never to be taken for granted or treated as a right.

ENJOYING GOD'S CREATION

To ensure that our image of God is not that of a joyless rule-giver, as the traditionalists would have us believe, it might be good to recall a rabbinical remark of great wisdom: 'There's only one question God will ask us when we meet him after death: "Did you enjoy my creation?"' What is enchanting about this remark is its invocation of the word 'enjoy' used by God. It gives an unusual picture of God whom we perhaps more usually have been taught to regard as stern and joyless, judging our sins and not sharing our enjoyments. The nameless rabbi portrays God as someone who gives us creation for our enjoyment and suggests that he too enjoys what he is making. The Bible gives warrant for this suggestion when it says in the Book of Genesis: 'God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good' [Genesis,1:31]. Science shows us a universe that is in the process of becoming. That is an intricate process that may take billions of years to work itself out. Nothing of that is revealed in the Bible. Our view of the universe is so different from that of the first Christians that it is hard to relate it to that time and place. Adapting the Gospel to changing cultures is always difficult, but it has to be done if the Gospel is to be lived and taught effectively in every age, and if faith is to be preserved by a constantly developing theology.

Enjoyment of creation can quickly become a silent prayer and can turn a walk in the countryside into an expression of gratitude to God for giving us not only a stunningly beautiful creation but an ability to enjoy it that is not granted to other creatures. In human beings nature becomes conscious of itself, thus making it possible for the Son of God to become human at a specific historical moment in the creative process. In the earliest years of the infant church, Christians expected the end of the world and the final coming of Christ in their own lifetime. With the passage of time it became clear that the end was not coming yet. We today live in a world that is showing no sign of ending, apart from the possible prospect of being struck by a migrant heavenly body, or by the result of a crazy politician igniting a nuclear bomb. As Pope Francis has told us in his encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, science is showing that by our neglect of the environment in which we live we are assaulting the world that God is creating, and possibly making our planet a desert.

We are living in a world very different from that lived in by Jesus or the first Christians. Yet his teaching has a permanence

about it that can be made applicable to any age and in any culture. The Samaritan going down from Jerusalem to Jericho may be doing so in a spacecraft, but Jesus' teaching-story retains its relevance when it is properly interpreted. The Greek word kenosis (self-emptying) is being invoked in the context not only of the Incarnation, but also of creation. In other words, in creating the world God willingly leaves aside the exercise of all the infinite attributes that traditionally belong to God.

ART AND CREATION

Enjoyment of art is another instance of enjoying creation, and, moreover, it makes the artist a co-creator with God. Music is the art that most moves me to thoughts of transcendence and desire for God.

Anton Bruckner, the Austrian composer who was a devout and homely Catholic, was once asked what he would say to God at the last judgement. He replied that he would offer God his *Te Deum*, a work that he wrote in prayerful faith and cherished accordingly. Bruckner wrote his symphonies in the presence of God. His faith was simple and deep. He is often associated with Gustav Mahler; but there were differences between them. The great conductor Bruno Walter, in a celebrated essay, wrote: 'Change characterized Mahler's life; constancy Bruckner's. In a certain sense this is also true of their work. Bruckner sang of his God and for his God, Who ever and unalterably occupied his soul. Mahler struggled toward Him. Not constancy, but change ruled his inner life, hence also his music.' This difference between them is fascinating, and, as Walter points out, it can be heard in their music. Mahler is very conscious of the difficulties of finding God.

His music asks questions, often in a new way with newly-forged harmonies and orchestrations expressing a quest into the unknown. Bruckner, on the other hand, possesses a calm, deep and firm faith that resounds through the concert-hall with assurance and absolute trust, expressing the glories of God in powerful orchestral climaxes. We need both of these composers to express the fullness of our journey into God, and through both of them and a procession of other musicians, God continues to create the world, the difference being that God is now working with co-creators. Artists are active agents in the process of creation. What a pity that there are fundamentalists who, taking the Book of Genesis literally and having no sense of poetry, throw their Christian faith into sharp contrast with the assured findings of science. The God of creation revealed by science is the same God as the God of Jewish and Christian revelation. There can be no clash between them though there may be significant differences in their musical visions and

their compositional techniques. Science shows us the intricacies as well as the sheer size of the universe, the interplay between chance and necessity, and the deficiencies in our cosmic knowledge. The grandeur of creation mirrors the magnificence of its Creator, and contemplation of it leads effortlessly to the prayer of adoration. Indeed, it is good to take our initial notions of creation from what science has revealed about the universe, including Darwin's theory of evolution through natural selection. Initially it may seem strange to approach God in prayer in the light of what science is saying about the created world, when we are aware that many scientists are not believers, and that some of them go out of their way to deride religious faith.

We have every right to indulge the paradox of drawing religious inspiration from facts and theories that are normally thought of as assertively secular and possibly inimical to all kinds of religion. God may enjoy the irony of our having the nerve to enter a world that often prides itself on its superiority to religion and taking from it the raw material for prayer! We need also to remember that we are fortunate to have scientists who are believers, often distinguished in both science and theology, thus giving silent evidence that there is no conflict between honest science and honest religion. In his letter to the Philippians St. Paul quotes from an early Christian hymn which uses the word kenosis, which today is lending itself to theological development, especially to the theology of creation. The original text is to be found in Paul's Letter to the Philippians (Phil.2:6) '[Christ Jesus] who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself taking the form of a slave being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross'.

GOD'S ATTRIBUTES

It was philosophy, not revelation, that decided what God's attributes are. There is a long list of the divine attributes – all of them abstractions. I concentrate here on just one: God's immobility. As First Mover, God creates all that exists. If taken literally, this makes God incapable of being moved even in a psychological sense. The result is a God who can't be influenced by human creatures, a God who has no empathy with them in their joys and sorrows and who lives in a remote fastness that never changes. Consequently, change comes to be seen as an imperfection and changelessness a perfection; and this conviction enters church life over the centuries and is included even in its liturgy where God is honoured for it. It is also reflected in ecclesiology where church teaching is commonly described as unchanging. Some high-ranking ecclesiastics today

try to buttress their ultra-conservative views by invoking the notion of a changeless church and by practising a theology that is static and resistant to new perspectives, which they invoke in judgement upon fellow Catholics who are trying to speak to modern men and women.

DIPOLAR THEISM

There is a strong movement in Christian and Jewish theology today which reacts against a metaphysics that promotes changelessness and immobilism. Instead, it promotes 'becoming' over 'being'. Classical metaphysics could not speak about God becoming, because becoming implies change, and change implies imperfection. 'Process Thought' is the name given to this new intellectual movement. This is not the place to examine Process Theology in any detail except to say that even where theologians cannot accept several aspects of it, it must be conceded that it has had a stimulating effect on general Christian theology. God has become closer to us than was ever possible under the old metaphysical system. We are much less inclined today to regard changelessness as a divine prerogative that can be used to oppose reform, and we are more ready to think of God as having a real relationship with creation, especially human creation. We can now think of God as a much more attractive being than classical metaphysics had allowed. It has been achieved largely by distinguishing between two poles. Dipolar theism is the idea that God has both a changing aspect (God's existence as a Living God) and an unchanging aspect (God's eternal essence). God retains unchanging attributes, but freely chooses not to use them in relationship with creation. This process gives us a solid basis for prayer to God the Creator and a lesson in how we can see how God's chosen action in the world is not to command but to commend, which in turn allows us to appreciate the work of Jesus Christ who laid aside his proper claim to equality with God but emptied himself taking the form of a slave.

THE 'SELF-EMPTYING' OF GOD

It is one thing to have infinite powers. It is quite another nobly to decide not to use them. As we have seen the term kenosis was used by St. Paul (Phil 2:7) to describe the 'self-emptying' of God's Son when he took on human nature and became a man. Some modern theology extends the term 'self-emptying' to creation, showing that God engages in self-emptying in continuing to create the world while giving it a significant measure of autonomy. The Scottish Anglican theologian, John Macquarrie, saw the contradiction in Process theology: it saves God's vulnerability though at the expense

of God's omnipotence. Macquarrie makes good use of kenotic theology in a bid to preserve both God's omnipotence and bipolar character. He is trying to find a via media between the classical view of God as immovable and the God of Process theology, seeking to throw off the immobilism of the medieval theory of a changeless God. He calls his theory 'dialectical theism'. It claims that

> In creating an existent other than himself, and in granting to that existent a measure of freedom and autonomy, God surrendered any unclouded bliss that might have belonged to him had he remained simply wrapped up in his own perfection. In creating, he consents to know the pain and frustration of the world.

God freely surrendering his 'unclouded bliss' makes it quite clear that God freely relinquishes the panoply of divine attributes bestowed on God by classical theology. In short, possession of infinite divine attributes does not necessarily mean that God has to invoke or use them. God can make him/herself vulnerable, which is a strength not a weakness. Recognition of this can alter our image of God. One has to admit that the best that can be said for the classical attributes of God is that they gave us a picture of the infinities of God. Let's name some of them: omniscience, infinity, omnipresence, sovereignty, eternity, immutability – a somewhat overpowering set of attributes. The main inconvenience about this list of God's perfections is self-evident: with the best will in the world it is rather difficult to love an unmoved mover.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IMAGES

Throughout this article I have referred to the images that we form of God. Let me conclude with a few final reflections that are particularly relevant to the idea of creation. In thinking about God we necessarily form images of God. These are unavoidable even by dedicated metaphysicians with their love of abstractions. The important thing to remember is that to the extent that we employ images of God, we must always remember that these images are never God. They help us to represent God to our imaginations on our journey into God. Great attention needs to be given to ensuring that pupils and parishioners are aware of the damage that can be done by images that betray the nearness of God to us as portrayed by the Scriptures, Hebrew and Christian.

In March 1963 the Anglican bishop of Woolwich. John Robinson, published an article in the *The Observer* newspaper. Headed 'Our Image of God Must Go', it summarised the thesis of his book, *Honest to God*. Both the article and the book caused a storm of outraged criticism from traditionalists of every stripe. The

heading of the article contains a truth of permanent importance that deserves careful consideration in any age. Our image of God must be carefully distinguished from the actual being of God. There is no way to God except through our images which necessarily change at various points in our lives. The passage from childhood to adulthood is obviously a major occasion of change. Whatever image we have of God, we have always to remember that the image is never Godself and may need to be changed. The only image that is nearest to the truth about God is Jesus Christ, and even there, only his contemporaries actually saw him and heard him speak. We today have to make do with what has been written about him, coupled with the use of our own imagination which may be distorted by a variety of causes that depend on our state of health, our education and the views of others. There are preachers and teachers who can promote images of God that alienate and instil in their listeners images of God that are far from the Gospel. Some time ago I heard on the radio a man who told his listeners that when he was fifteen years of age he woke up one morning and found that he no longer believed in God – and the relief was tremendous. Clearly his image of God was in very serious need of healing.

Amazing Grace. Whereas religious faith must be something that is deeply personal, it must never be allowed to become a personal possession, however prized that possession might be. Salvation is not a commodity that we either possess or do not possess. In the imagery of another much-loved, if somewhat over-used, hymn 'Amazing Grace', grace is leading us home; we are on a journey with grace, it is not our possession.

– + Richard Clarke, *Shouldering the Lamb,* (Dublin: Dominican Publications) p.89.