

A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE MEANING OF LIFE

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One of the basic traditional statements of Christian belief is to be found in the so-called Apostles' Creed, which opens with these words: 'I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth'. This expresses the Christian conviction that human beings are part of a created order, the Creator and sustainer of which is God. Human life is therefore the gift of God. And were Christians to be asked to justify this belief they would more often than not appeal to the Creation story found in the opening chapters of the Hebrew Scriptures, which stand at the head of the Christian as of the Jewish Bible.

This may seem somewhat strange in a post-critical age when Christian scholars and theologians have for the most part abandoned a literal interpretation of the opening chapters of the book of Genesis, and ceased to see in them a scientific explanation of the origin of the world and of human life. Few academic Christian theologians today would want to relive the heated and sometimes fruitless controversies of the nineteenth century over the relative claims of science and religion to a monopoly of true insight into the origins of life. And

assumed. It did not need to be proved. Indeed, there is no attempt in Genesis, or anywhere else in the Bible for that matter, to prove or even to argue for the proposition that God is Creator. Genesis may attempt to describe how God created; that God created is assumed. Not that the question 'how' was settled. Far from it! Genesis itself contains two distinct accounts of how God created, neither of which is unique to Genesis, since both share features with other Creation stories, which form part of the inherited mythology of the ancient world, more especially as found in the traditions of Sumerian, Babylonian, Assyrian and Egyptian civilizations.

The two accounts in Genesis date from the tenth to ninth and the sixth to fifth centuries before the Christian era respectively. The later account comes first (Genesis 1:1-2:4a) and is derived from the so-called Priestly source, while the older narrative is the work of the so-called Yahwist (Genesis 2:4b-3:24). The differences between the two accounts are not insignificant, though it is not part of our present purpose to offer a close and detailed analysis of them, since for centuries the Christian tradition saw the two accounts as forming a single whole presenting a description of the origin of humankind and enunciating a number of basic truths about the human condition - for example, that it is sinful or corrupt. We shall, however, need to note and analyse some of these differences in the course of our

What the narratives assert is that humankind owes its origins to the activity of a personal Creator. This contrasts with Greek philosophy's preoccupation with establishing the impersonal first cause of the created order. What Christians have tended to do is to combine the Hebrew and Greek ways of thinking so that the personal Creator is also seen as the first cause. This, of course, goes beyond Genesis.

If we examine the various primeval accounts of Creation we can identify four possible ways of thinking about the process itself. It is sometimes presented as an act of making - this is the approach of the Yahwist in Genesis 2:4b-end. Or else it may be a kind of birth or generation, something which is hinted at in the reference to 'generations' in Genesis 2:4a. Another approach is to envisage Creation resulting from conflict between opposing forces, such as we find in the Babylonian myth about Marduk and Tiamat. This is echoed in the reference to the deep (Hebrew tehom) in Genesis 1:2, and it is also found elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures in the Prophets and in the Psalms : for example, Psalm 104. The final model is that adopted by the Priestly writer, namely Creation by word of command. God speaks, and it is done. These are the options as they appeared to various peoples in the ancient world. We could no doubt think of many more; my point, however, is that disagreement as to the how of

the apostle Paul and earlier Jewish exegetes in 'seeing death as 'the wages of sin', i.e. the punishment for disobedience. Be that as it may, Creation still has a positive goal, if the Priestly writer is to be believed, since he repeatedly asserts that God saw what he had done and concluded that 'it was very good' (Genesis 1:4,10,12,19,21 etc.). Indeed, the sabbath rest which brings the Priestly writer's narrative to a close may be saying that eternal rest, not work, is the ultimate purpose and goal of the created order, particularly since humankind has been made 'in the image' of God the Creator.

The claim that God created man 'in his own image' (Genesis 1:27) has attracted more attention than any other verse in the Genesis narrative, and is often cited in defence of the assertion that humankind has a special place in the created order. The phrase is probably intended to convey the writer's belief that to crown the Creation God created a creature with whom he could interact. The image corresponds to the one it reflects, not in the sense of having a similar physical appearance or sharing similar attributes or characteristics. The significance of saying that male and female, the human species, have been created in God's image is that human beings are capable of relating to God. This claim is not made for any other creature, so it is fair to conclude that the text is making a special claim for the human creature. This is confirmed when we

will and purpose of the Creator, though the irony is that the same code of Law defends this principle by applying the ultimate sanction of capital punishment. The same principle is also regarded by Christians as relevant to issues such as abortion, euthanasia and suicide, which have traditionally been condemned as acts contrary to the will of God, and therefore sinful.

A further feature of these accounts is that humans are created to relate not simply to the Creator, but to one another. Humans were created as social beings from the very beginning. To begin with, humans have the capacity to propagate, a capacity they share with the animals; indeed, the narratives occasionally show an almost modern awareness of the fact that humans are part of the animal world. The injunction in Genesis 1:28, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it', has sometimes been used by Christians to justify their refusal to sanction population control. This would seem to me to conflict with one of the main thrusts of the Genesis narrative that all the earth's resources are available for human use, including so-called artificial means of contraception. What the command to fill the earth is saying is that it is the responsibility of each generation of humans to ensure the continuation of the human race. Genesis has no place for the celibate hermit! Indeed, according to the Yahwist account Adam (the man) originally existed in

be God-given. The Genesis view is that human beings are limited to a span which extends from birth to death. This is as much as God allows. When God takes away the breath, the human dies (see Psalm 104:29). And yet Genesis recognizes that humans have a longing for eternal life, the fruit of the tree of life, which is 'in the midst of the garden' (Genesis 2:9; 3:22,24). For Genesis, however, such life belongs to God alone.

The fact that God is presented as specifically commanding Adam not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 2:17) and that the narrative then goes on to describe how he disobeys the command shows that humankind has been created free. Since humans are free, they can enter into a relationship with God. After all, they are 'in God's image'. Such a relationship can, of course, be negative as well as positive. It can, as we have seen, lead to alienation from God. Similarly humans can be alienated from one another. This is the obverse of the love that can prevail against other institutions.

Humans then are free to disobey God's command, and the Yahwist sees the human search for knowledge as the occasion for the first act of disobedience. For some strange reason Adam is forbidden to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge. It is as if some primeval innocence

defective. By their very nature humans are capable of disobeying God and of thereby setting themselves up against God. Again the emphasis is more on the defective nature of humans in community than on the defects of a particular individual. This community aspect of sin is further illustrated by the narratives of the flood (chapters 6-9) and the tower of Babel (chapter 11). The consequences of this for the quality or the potential quality of human life are obvious. Human life can never be enjoyed to perfection; the quality of our lives is inevitably defective in some way or other, as a consequence either of our own actions or of the actions of others or indeed by dint of the defective nature of society as a whole. The starving millions of the world today bear eloquent witness to the truth of this assertion.

What then is our function as human beings? According to Genesis 2:15, 'the Lord God...put him (the man) in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it'. The Priestly writer says something similar in his account at Genesis 1:28 where humans are commanded to 'fill the earth and subdue it'. Work is an essential feature of human life. Those who do not work or have no work have lives that are less than complete. Humans were never, not even at the beginning, part of a Utopia where no one had to work. Work is not seen as a direct consequence of or punishment for disobedience. Work is a feature of human life from the very beginning. What follows from the act of

Adam and Eve from the garden God still provides them with clothing to cover their shame (Genesis 3:21), and God still blesses them with issue, as the woman acknowledges on giving birth to Cain in Genesis 4:1, 'I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord'. Human life was not without its blessings, even after expulsion from the garden, though for Genesis this life was limited to the span extending from birth to death. 'You are dust, and to dust you shall return'. At the same time the narrative seems to recognise that we have 'immortal longings' in us, since it recognizes the human yearning to reach out to the tree of life, to eat of its fruit and live for ever. For Genesis such eternal life belongs to God alone, but as we turn to the New Testament in the Christian Bible we shall see that the essence of Christian belief is that humans are not restricted to a span of life that ends with physical death. Instead, those who are in Christ are privileged to have a share in eternal life in the presence of God the Father, who raised him from the dead. This, for Christians, is the fundamentally new dimension of life that is added to the merely mortal existence, which for Genesis was the invariable fate of the human species.

was limited to the span between birth and death, they also believed, as did the Pharisees, that at some time in the future the living God would raise them to new life, eternal life, the life enjoyed by God. This life would be characterized by the disappearance of sin; in other words, it would be a perfect version of the human life experienced by ordinary mortals in their normal, earthly existence. Many of the detailed aspects of this belief are hazy, to say the least. It is not clear, for example, precisely who would inherit this eternal life nor is it clear what will happen to those who are debarred from entry, but such details need not concern us here.

What concerns us is that Christians believe, on the basis of the evidence of the experiences of his earliest followers recorded in the New Testament, that God raised Jesus of Nazareth, to new life 'on the third day' after his execution by crucifixion at the hands of the Romans. For the apostle Paul, who later became a follower of Jesus the Christ, but who had previously been a zealous Pharisee, the resurrection of Jesus was but the firstfruits of the general resurrection expected at the end of the age as a prelude to the establishment of God's perfect kingdom of love and justice. And if Jesus Christ was the firstfruits then in a sense the new age, the final age, was already here. If so, this had important consequences for the quality of life experienced by those who were in Christ here

in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come'. And in the following verse he adds, 'All this is from God'. In other words, the resurrection of Jesus, proof of which had been given to Paul on the road to Damascus, was seen as the first act of re-creation, and just as the spirit of God had been at work in the first creation, so it was the spirit of God that had given new life to the crucified Jesus. Similarly those who had faith in what God had accomplished for the salvation of humankind became part of this new creation, again in the power of the spirit. Paul believed that God, through the spirit, was the source of his own conversion. His subsequent life was lived in the power of that same spirit, to such an extent that he felt that he was already sharing in the new, eternal life here and now, even though at other times he makes it clear that the fulfilment still lies in the future. For Paul then eternal life is sometimes a future fulfilment of his present hope, but at other times it is a decisive renewal of the present, because the first act of the new creation has already been accomplished. Christ, the last Adam, has already entered eternal life, as the first fruits, to be followed in due course by the full harvest of those who die in faith.

It is important to emphasise that just as life was originally seen as God's gift to humanity, so too new life is a gift or an act of God.

mortal flesh'. In other words, Christians can endure all manner of physical deprivation and degradation because they are convinced that they already have a guarantee of a fuller life in Christ which will not be terminated by physical death. A new dimension has been added to human life, a spiritual dimension; indeed, Paul speaks of a 'spiritual body', that is, the physical body taken over and revitalized by the power of the life-giving spirit of God. Entering this realm of existence ultimately brings righteousness, peace and joy, according to Romans 14:17. It also allows entry into the presence of the living God and seeing that God face to face. What Paul is saying therefore is that humans can live as if they are already in the presence of God, and that believing in this has revolutionary implications for the lifestyle of the Christian, even in this mortal, earthbound mode of existence.

Turning finally to another work in the New Testament, the gospel of John, we find an author, who states his purpose in writing thus : 'These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name' (John 20:31). Furthermore, this life is not something that awaits those who believe in the future; it is present here and now, to such a degree that physical death is an irrelevance. For example, the author can say (5:24), 'He who hears my word and believes him who

the point that for the Christian belief in Jesus as the life-giving and revelatory Word of God is the means of entry into eternal life, though for many Christians (myself included) this would not rule out other paths to whatever we mean by salvation.

It should not, however, be thought that belief in this context is mere intellectual assent, or that this author in particular or Christians in general see natural, mortal existence as of no consequence in the context of the fuller life bestowed by the Father on those who believe in the Son. Far from it! It is in Jesus' earthly life, i.e. in his natural, mortal existence, that Christians see God's purpose in giving life to the human creature fully disclosed. This in turn discloses the nature of the living Creator-God, so much so that the author sees Jesus as the incarnation of God. Furthermore, the author's emphasis on the believer's enjoyment of eternal life here already means that the fuller life can be lived in the context of a normal, earth-bound existence. Far from being an irrelevance earthly existence now becomes the forum where humans are privileged to share in the eternal life of the divinity. This was true of Jesus, and according to the fourth evangelist it is also true of those who through spiritual rebirth become children of God.

The evangelist also draws out the implications of this for the way

Christians believe that human life is God's gift and that its meaning is best understood in terms of the opportunity and indeed challenge it presents to enter into a relationship of love with God, the giver of life. What this relationship can be was seen in Jesus of Nazareth and in his total dedication to living out the love of God within the physical limitations of his earthly life, a love which led him to give himself for others, even to the extent of giving his life. Christians further believe that God raised this Jesus from death into a fuller life thus bestowing on him a divine status, which is the ultimate destiny of humankind, and that in consequence there is a sense in which the believer can enjoy the benefits of this fuller life here and now by entering into a communion of love with God in Christ and by seeking to incarnate that love which God has for all who are in Christ, and indeed for the whole of humanity.

The purpose of this paper has been to outline the biblical evidence on which Christian understandings of the meaning of human life have traditionally been based. I am conscious that I have not been able to consider the work of scholars, who are seeking to reinterpret Christian teaching in the light of new evidence derived from the natural sciences, psychology and the study of other religions. My hope is that our joint discussion in this Committee will further this