

Creation

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All monotheistic religions are convinced that the world was created by a deity. For the Christian religion, the two creation narratives at the beginning of the bible (cf. art. Scripture) are of particular relevance. Christianity derives from these narratives an understanding of the origin, meaning, and purpose of all living things. However, conflicts of interpretation regarding the role and responsibility of humans in the overall context of creation are always present. It is interesting to note that the authors of the biblical texts were already aware that the world as they experienced it was marked by a deficit of justice.

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1. What it means to speak about creation

To speak about creation is not to use a neutral, descriptive term to describe ourselves and what exists around us. The term implies a creative force on the one hand and something created on the other. It therefore designates a very specific view of the world. Speaking of creation – instead of nature, for example – immediately raises questions: Who created what? Could what was created have just as easily not been created or could it have perhaps been created differently? Is creation complete or open? Was it a once-off act or is it actually a dynamic process? What is the role of the creator (cf. art. God) and what is the role of the created? Is there one creative force or several? How is creation created and for what purpose? Is the accepted theory of evolution incompatible with the creation of the world by a creative force? Who or what could this force be? And what about the Big Bang theory? Was only one world created – ours? Or several? From what was it created? Out of nothing? And what does it mean if we assume that our planet was created for good reasons and therefore should be preserved in existence but that it is now threatened by us, to the point that we are causing entire species to go extinct? How do we even know anything about the idea of a created world? What are the underlying sources?

By itself, the above selection of questions makes it clear that the topic of creation is a complex one. Numerous other theological and scientific topics are related to it. How one answers certain of these questions determines the possible answers to others. It is therefore by no means a trivial matter if one believes that the world was created by a creator and is continuously – even today – accompanied and maintained in existence (*creatio continua*) by this creator, or if one believes instead either that there is no creator at all or that creation was completed long ago and has since been left to its own devices.

2. The Question about Origins and Meaning Unites Humanity

For as long as humanity has existed, we have asked about the origin of the world. We have always been driven by the question of why there is something rather than nothing, where we come from, what existed before us, and why we are in the world. The question about the meaning and origin of all that exists is therefore a very old one. However, it is a question that cannot be answered conclusively. What we find in all cultures and religions are numerous attempts at answers, explanations, and interpretations. The first recognizable *creation myths* (i.e., traditional tales and stories about the creation of the world) were developed by the Sumerians (a people from Mesopotamia) and date back to roughly 3000 B.C. All religions and cultures offer their own answers to the question of the origin and meaning of everything. Christianity is no exception in this respect.

3. The Christian Perspective: The Being of God in Creation

Christianity is simultaneously a monotheistic^[1] religion, an Abrahamic^[2] religion, a religion of revelation, and a religion of the book. What significance does this have for the topic of *creation*? Christianity assumes that there are good grounds for believing in the existence of a God – and only one God, not several. This divinity has revealed itself to the world, as is already attested in the first books of the sacred scripture, the main source of Christianity (e.g. Exodus 3:14). Right at the beginning of the sacred scriptures, God introduces Godself to human beings with the words “I am who I am” (Ex 3:14, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Version*). Existence [*Dasein*] therefore seems to be

the foundational expression of who God is. This is a God who is close, who is (simply) there without temporal or spatial limitation. "I am" is also an *expression of relations*, because this God is not there for Godself but is always present in creation. However, God is not only present (immanent) in the created world but also exceeds it insofar as God is more than the world (transcendent).^[3] There are numerous testimonies of direct and indirect revelatory experiences throughout sacred scripture. The majority of these revelatory experiences are also highly significant for the other two religions of revelation – Judaism and Islam. For Christianity, the climax of revelation is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ that is attested to in the Second Testament.^[4]

3.1. Creative Three-in-oneness (*Trinity*)

However, it is crucial to note that Christians do not assume that Jesus Christ was created like the rest of the world. According to the Nicene creed, it is part of Christian belief that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has existed with the Father since eternity, as has the Holy Spirit. God has always been a Trinitarian God. Father, Son and Holy Spirit belong together. When it is claimed that God created the world, from a Christian perspective this refers to the triune Godhead of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (cf. art. Trinity).

3.2. Creation theologies infer God's existence from the world

Religious interpretations of the world – that is, the linking of the world as we experience it to a being that transcends it – always say something about this transcendent being, this divinity. Every discourse and teaching about creation is therefore simultaneously a discourse and teaching about the Creator – i.e., creation *theology*. Since the process of interpreting and researching the relationship between God the creator and the created world is an unfinished and dynamic endeavor, there are many different conceptions of creation theology. It is therefore appropriate to speak of *creation theologies* (in the plural).

4. The Creation Narratives in the Book of Genesis

The primary sources for Christian creation theologies are the first two creation narratives in the opening book of the sacred scripture, the book of Genesis. There are many other passages in the sacred scripture that also touch on creation theology topics (e.g. the Book of Job, the Psalms) and in which the first two creation narratives undoubtedly play a prominent role. These first two narratives function not only as the beginning of the Bible; they also describe the beginning of everything. In this way, they form the foundation of Christian creation theologies. Most of these narratives that touch on creation theology themes can be found in the First Testament. The narrative of Noah's Ark – especially the covenant that God makes with God's creation – is also of particular importance for creation theologies. Here God promises not to destroy creation again. The rainbow (Gen 9:13) is still today a symbol of the unbroken and clearly visible covenant between "God and all living creatures" (Gen 9:16).

4.1. Creation *narratives* (*Schöpfungserzählungen*) are not creation *reports* (*Schöpfungsberichte*)

Both creation stories at the beginning of the Bible are fascinating for several reasons, the first of which is that there are two, not simply one. This already makes it clear that those who decided which books are binding for Christians and should be included in the bible (in the so-called canon)^[5] did not want to (or could not) commit themselves to only one of the two narratives. Two independently created and very different stories about the creation of the world therefore stand side by side but also merge into each other. A deliberate decision was clearly made not to unify them. From this we can infer that there are different ways of thinking about the origin of the world and the relationship between God and creation.

Researchers have long sought to date accurately the two stories. While it was previously thought that the second creation narrative is the older of the two, this view is currently outdated. The scholarship presently indicates that both

narratives originated in roughly the same period. From the perspective of systematic theology, it is important to grasp that these are *narratives*, not creation *reports*. To see them as reports would – as with an accident report – give the impression that someone was actually present at the creation of the world and has written a witness report. This is by no means the case.

According to the most current research, the two creation stories originated in the 1st millennium BC. Natural scientists are, however, convinced that life has existed on earth for around three to four billion years. What this means for the biblical creation stories is the following: around three thousand years ago, the divinely inspired authors of the bible composed narratives that reflect on the origin, cause, and meaning of the earth, without claiming to know what actually happened physically or biologically around three to four billion years ago.

Although it is clear that the creation narratives in Genesis are not factual reports, they nevertheless remain key texts for the Christian faith and its understanding of human beings (anthropology).^[6] For theological research (i.e., for those who deal with the interpretation of these texts), it is important to work through the content of these texts. It is necessary to understand what these texts wanted to say in their own time (and what they can still tell us today). This is the case not only for academic theology but equally for theological praxis, pastoral work, church life, as well as personal life.

The most influential texts for Christian creation theology are the two creation narratives found in Genesis 1:1–2:4a and Genesis 2:4b–3:24. The central claims of both texts will be explained in what follows: what is created, the process of creation (i.e. the mode), as well as those aspects that are of particular interest (and in some cases have received little attention or have been interpreted in a one-sided manner).

4.2. Creation narratives in Genesis 1:1–2:4a

The first creation narrative presents us with the notion that the various elements of the world emerged on different days. This narrative also introduces central theological concepts such as the Sabbath, humans being created in the image of God (cf. art. Imago Dei), and the so-called *dominion mandate*.

4.2.1. How cosmos comes from chaos (*Cosmogenesis*)

The first narrative begins with the opening words of the sacred scripture (the First Testament or Torah). The state of the earth is here described as chaos, a confusion (*Tohuwabohu*) of a primordial flood and of God's spirit hovering over the waters (Gen 1:2). From this *material*, these energies, from this chaos, God creates the cosmos (i.e., order: *cosmogenesis*). Chaos thus became cosmos and, according to this narrative, did so within seven days. The mode – that is, the way in which God created – is by *separating*. The *act* of creation itself occurs through language. The text repeats the phrase "Then God said: Let there be [...]." The light was separated from the darkness, the heavens from the earth, the day from the night, the water from the land, the flying animals from the water animals and the land animals, and so on. Order thereby emerges through separation. Specific works of creation are assigned to each of the six days of creation. On the third day, for example, God created the earth and the sea as well as plants and trees (cf. Genesis 1:9–13). Insofar as they express a process of ordering, these six days are to be understood symbolically, not literally.^[7]

4.2.2. How God judges (almost) everything to be good

Genesis 1 describes the acts of creation schematically, and they all conclude – with one exception – with the sentence "And God saw that it was good." Every *work of creation* – whether water, earth, sky, stars, plants or animals – every single effect of the creative act is judged to be good and is individually acknowledged, including the creation of wild animals and creeping things on the first half of the sixth day. The second act of creation on the sixth day is distinct: this is not because something special is created that differs from the previous five and a half days of creation in terms of the style of the creative act, but rather because this is the only act of creation that God does not acknowledge with

the concluding judgment “And God saw that it was good” (Gen 1:26–30). What happened on the afternoon of the sixth day?

4.2.3. The Creation of humankind as a communal act

The afternoon of the sixth day focuses on the creation of the human. This act of creation also contains other notable features: in particular, although the creation of the human begins with the familiar “Then God said,” this is followed by a plural form “Let us make humankind” (Gen 1:26). Researchers are divided as to how this plural is to be understood. Who is meant by “we”? Is God speaking here of Godself in the *pluralis majestatis* – like a king? Or does it refer to the divine Trinity – Father, Son, and Spirit? Or is God addressing the other creatures that have already been brought into being up – that is, the entire *collective of creation*, everything that is already alive and that has already received the divine creation mandate “Be fruitful and multiply” (e.g. Gen 1:22) prior to the creation of human beings? It might by now already be clear that creation is not a one-sided process but more so a joint work of the creator and the co-creators, the *cosmic power* and the *local powers*. What follows – that is, in Genesis 1:26f., where we read: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ So God created humankind (*adam*) in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” – shapes theology still to this day and provides much material for discussion and debate. Hardly any other act of creation has been interpreted, manipulated, and distorted as much as these two verses from the first creation narrative.

4.2.4. The Dominion Mandate (*Dominium terrae*)

A highly controversial statement is the dominion mandate given to human beings in Genesis 1:28: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” This command has become known as the *dominium terrae* dictum – “dominate the earth” or “subdue the earth.” While the first part of this creation mandate was also given to plants and animals [“Let the earth put forth vegetation” (Gen 1:11); “Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures” (Gen 1:20); “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.” (Gen 1:22); “Let the earth bring forth living creatures of every kind” (Gen 1:24)], only the human receives the so-called mandate to take dominion. This single verse has long fueled exploitative human behavior. The dominion mandate has been understood as divine legitimization for a life lived at the expense of others, whether it be non-human beings or other human beings who were denied full membership in the human species and who, insofar as they were defined as being closer to the animal kingdom, could be exploited like the non-human species (e.g., women, black people, people with disabilities, etc.). Lynn White ^{GND} and Carl Amery ^{GND} were quick to point out the complicity of Christianity in the current global destruction of the environment and to criticize the continual destruction of our own habitat, something no other species does. ^[8]

Especially in our present moment in which significant parts of life on our planet have already been wiped out or are under massive threat, there are more critical readings of this verse that seek to read the passage as expressing a mandate for humans to be *custodians*, *administrators*, or *stewards* of creation. ^[9] A mandate to take dominion at the expense of others is presently no longer theologically justifiable.

4.2.5. Created in the Image of God (*Imago Dei*)

Another aspect of the creation of the human has become momentarily important. Gen 1:27 states: “So God created humankind (*adam*) in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Here we find the creation of the human as the “image of God” – *Imago Dei*. ^[10] Even up to the present day, attempts have been made to deploy this verse in order to argue for a God-ordained and uniquely intended *gender binary*. Of course, it is currently considered established knowledge that there are more than two biological sexes and a diversity of socially

constructed genders. This does not at all contradict the original biblical text, which states only that God created humans with more than one sex. *Adam* is a neutral collective term for humanity, derived from *adamah*, the earth. Adam is the genderless earthling or the earthling encompassing all genders. Neither does Genesis 1:27 state that God created humans exclusively as “male” and “female” – just as the naming only of the “cornerstones” (*Eckpfeiler*) in the creation of day and night, land and water, heaven and earth does not rule out the existence of in-between realities (e.g., twilight, wetlands and moors, the troposphere, etc.). Nor is there any indication of what those humans who were created as “male” and “female” are or should be like. Neither primary nor secondary sexual characteristics are named, nor any “typical” characteristics, traits, or social markers.

These considerations render problematic any attempt to use this act of creation to delegitimize gender diversity and certain sexual orientations or to argue for the necessity of gender-specific characteristics or behaviors. Among others, queering theologies resist such interpretations in the name of the creative Godhead.^[11] It is more productive to ask what it means to be created “in the image of God,” when the text also states that we should not make an image of God at all (at least not just one) and that God does not present Godself to creation as a being that can be imaged but simply as “I-am” (Ex 3:14).^[12] In Ex 3:14, God presents Godself as the being-that-is, as a relational being. Being created in the image of God could say something about the fact that we are always related to others in our existence. Form (*Gestalt*) would then be the inner design of our life, our attitude, not our outward appearance, which we could not even judge, because “no one has ever seen God” (John 1:18a).

4.2.6. The commandment to eat

In addition to the co-creaturely [collective creation (*Schöpfungskollektiv*)] creation of the human (Adam) as the image of the relational God (*Imago Dei*) and the mandate to rule (*Dominium terrae*) and to be fruitful, there is also a noteworthy commandment for humans and animals that pertains to food: they are all to feed on the “plant yielding seed [...] and every tree with seed in its fruit” (Gen 1:29). Both humans and animals are depicted here – in a world that God acknowledges and confirms as “(very) good” – as vegans.

This is remarkable insofar as the authors of this text (in the 1st millennium BC) most likely also ate animals and animal products. Nonetheless, they declare the consumption of meat as a post-paradise phenomenon – that is, something that emerges only after the great rupture between humans and God, the so-called Fall of humanity^[13] in Genesis 2f. (cf. art. Sin), the expulsion from the Garden of Eden,^[14] and the Flood.^[15] Only then are humans, who have by now become sinful, allowed to eat meat (with restrictions): “Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood” (Gen 9:3–4). The authors of the first creation narrative (i.e. three thousand years ago) clearly adhered to the belief that eating animals was not part of an originally intact and good world and that God at first neither intended nor desired it.

Although we live in a post-paradisical age, these texts provide us with the testimonies of a people who imagined a good and just world and who also perhaps wanted *Eden* to be understood not only as a past reality but also as a future goal. Doing creation theology therefore means asking about both the origin and the goal: Eden tells us something about the eschaton,^[16] about the last things, about the kingdom of God, which we Christians already understand as being *in the midst of us* (Luke 17:21).

4.2.7. Climax of creation: the Sabbath

According to the first narrative in Genesis, the seventh day (the Sabbath) marks the conclusion of the creation event.^[17] It is the climax of the creation. On this day, God rested and allowed the entire creation, which God at the end of the sixth day described as “very good” in all its fullness, to take effect. No single work is emphasized here. Rather, God blessed and sanctified the entirety of creation (Gen 2:3).

4.2.8. Perceiving the biblical narratives as a challenge

Although there is always the danger of over-interpretation or of a one-sided interpretation of the text, this creation narrative already has the potential to unnerve and question us – with regard to our actions and projects as well as our way of seeking or asserting our place in the overall work of creation. For example, with regard to the relation between the dominion mandate given specifically to humans and the mandate that was *previously given to all others* creatures to become creatively active themselves (i.e., to be fruitful and multiply), we may ask: How does the sixth *mass extinction* on our planet caused by humans relate to the divine mandate “be fruitful, multiply”? What does it mean for God to sanctify the Sabbath as the climax of the week and to set it aside for contemplating the previous days without continuing to produce? How is it to be understood that the human, as the youngest species, is created into an already existing web of life (cf. art. Animals/Shared-World) (and thus knows that it has no knowledge of how everything was created, since it did not yet exist), that God values this totality of life, and also that we consider our value to be incomparably higher than that of our fellow creatures? Such questions offer lively material for theological, pastoral, and personal reflection.

4.3. Creation Narratives in Genesis 2:4b–3:24

Many of the creation motifs and narratives of the second creation story (Gen 2:4b–3:24) are already well-known: here as well we find discussion of matter/energy, of a spring that emerged from the earth (Gen 2:6). Plants are also created in this story, as well as a garden (Gen 2:8). Unlike in the first creation narrative, however, the central focus is less on the creation of an orderly world (cosmogogenesis) as it is on the creation of the human being (anthropogenesis). In the first creation narrative, the human – as the being created last – finds itself already surrounded by everything necessary for its life. In the second creation narrative, the newly created human being also receives a, so to speak, starting capital to which it has contributed nothing: a garden in Eden, which the human is placed in “to till and keep” (Gen 2:15).

4.3.1. Creation out of nothing or out of the deep?

Whether the world was created out of nothing or out of existing material remains an open discussion. The biblical testimony intimates the idea of a creation from the depths (*creatio ex profundis/tehom*).^[18] Historically speaking, the tradition maintains that the world was created from nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*). The main biblical basis for the latter position is 2 Macc 7:28. Although the question of the actual origin of the cosmos and of life is handled excellently by evolutionary biology^[19] and astrophysics, an ultimate answer to the question cannot be found in these disciplines either. Research into the theological dimension of the question therefore remains valid. This is more so a claim that emerges from the doctrine of God/properties of God than it is a theological statement about creation. Evolutionary and Big Bang theories should therefore not be understood as alternatives to a theological interpretation of the (origin) of the world (and vice versa) but rather as different yet complementary perspectives (scientific, physical, biological, theological). The theory of evolution is (by now) accepted by all science-based Christian theologies and is not considered a competitor to a theological interpretation of the world (cf. art. Evolution and Theology).

4.3.2. How humans came from earth (*Anthropogenesis*)

In the second creation narrative, the mode of creation is described in terms of craftsmanship. The material from which the human being (*adam*) is created is the earth (*adamah*): “then the Lord God [*Adonai*] formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (Gen 2:6b). The human is made of organic material and will one day become organic material again, as Genesis 3:19b states: “you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” Humans – like all other fellow creatures – are compostable.

God initially creates a (sexless) human being, Adam, who was given the task of tending a garden. This human was given only one *commandment*, one limit: Adam was not to eat from a single tree, “the tree of the knowledge of good

and evil," otherwise Adam would die (Gen 2:17). As God makes clear, to transgress the divinely-prescribed boundaries would introduce something that is hostile to life into a thoroughly life-friendly coexistence. In order to remedy the loneliness of this human being, God created the animals (from the same material as humans, from soil), among whom, however, "was not found a helper as [Adam's] partner." (Gen 2:20). God therefore created a second human. While the mode of creation of the first human being was formation from earth, the second human being was created from the side of the first (Gen 2:22). This is a motif that is present already in other ancient creation myths. What is notable in the text is that God puts Adam into a deep sleep before creating the second human (Gen 2:21). When Adam woke, he discovered the second human.

As in Genesis 1 where the authors place the creation of the human at the end of the creation story, the authors of the second creation story also ensure that the first human being cannot have any knowledge of the exact nature of God's creation. Inherent in the text is, then, a radical epistemological humility (a humility with regard to the possibilities of knowledge) in relation to the creation event. What is more, even Adam's side that God opened was subsequently closed again with flesh before the second human was formed – that is, God removed all traces of the creative process (cf. Gen 2:23–25).

4.3.3. How Adam became "Woman" and "Man"

In this act of creation, the *sexless earthling Adam* became two sexual humans at the moment when the second human being is created. It is interesting to note that the designation of the new human being as *Ishshah*, woman, does not come from God but from the "remaining part of the human being" (Gen 2:23), who thus becomes *Ish*, man. Both are made of the same material: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!" exclaims *Ish* (Gen 2:24). As in the first creation narrative, no specific characteristics are ascribed to *Ish* and *Ishshah*, except that the two will join together and that they are naked but unashamed (Gen 2:25).

4.4. Creation narratives: irritating origin myths

Concerning the emergence of the human as the last being in the first creation narrative, the reference to the shared-world, and the humbling description of the human in the creation narratives, it has become clear that the biblical creation narratives are origin myths, i.e., their function is to narrate the origin of everything from a particular point of view and context (in this case the 1st millennium BC). The narrative seeks to clarify how the world came to be the way it is perceived and experienced at this particular point in time as well as how this world can be reconciled with the belief in a *good and powerful creator*. It is relevant here that the divinely inspired yet human authors in both narratives take care to indicate that the first humans were not present or fully conscious when the other species were created. What is also of interest, for example, is that humans originally were only given plants for food and that they were not ashamed of their nakedness (Gen 2:25). If all of this were self-evident, there would have been no reason to mention it.

It is also clear that the authors of these texts were aware that the world as they experienced it was a damaged world and that a good God had originally intended this good, blessed, and holy world to be different to what it is now.

[20] This conviction simultaneously opens up a horizon that enables us to envision what our existence together (*Miteinander*) without sin could be like as God intended originally and what, even here and now, Christians should work for. Creation theologies are thus linked to theological ethics, political theologies, and liberation theologies.^[21] They are theologies of justice.

Recommended Literature

Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*. On Care for our common home, 24.05.2015 (Encyclical Letter, Vatican, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html), accessed on 07.01.2026.

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