

NEW CREATION AND A TRULY CATHOLIC CHURCH

This paper is short, and its theme is simple. It is a teasing out of some of what is signified by holding the two phrases, "new creation" and "a truly Catholic Church" within the same heading. It urges the necessity of two developments as a result of taking their juxtaposition seriously. These are, first, the recognition of the ecclesial significance of the new creation of Christ's kingdom and Christian hope, and, second, the greater shaping of the concept of "catholic Church" by the vocabulary of new creation.

"New creation and a truly catholic church" is indeed an intriguing title. This is partly because the two phrases it brings together might seem to have a natural theological affinity between them (as in the well-known hymn, "The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ, her Lord, She is his new creation, by water and the word"). But it is also because in Christian history they have often been in tension. In practice, those who have emphasised "new creation" as the heart of Christianity have tended to prefer "kingdom of God" language and issues to ecclesial ones. Those with a concern for the catholicity of the Church, on the other hand, have often been less taken up with the world-changing and world-challenging issues associated with "new creation".

Where the concept of "new creation" has come to the fore in Christian thought and practice, therefore, it has tended to inspire visions and movements with a sectarian, schismatic effect on the existing Christian Church. Ernst Bloch, whose Marxist-inspired trawl through cultural history both drew on Christian ideas of a new creation and prompted further interest in them, says that: "Only the heretical sects, with Joachim among them, allowed revelation to spring up anew even in the west, and the Holy Spirit accordingly recommended astonishing Pentecosts to them. It recommended social principles of Christianity which, as the example of Thomas Münzer indicates, were not cringing and did not treat the proletariat as a rabble. This was heretical Christianity and ultimately revolutionary Adventist utopia"¹

From Joachim of Fiore, through Savonarola and Münzer to contemporary political theologies, these visions have picked up on Biblical imagery of prophetic justice, Christ's preaching and practice of God's new age, and the apocalyptic end of all that is familiar. For Christians of this type (and they play a large part in contemporary British Methodism), ecclesiological issues are of low importance. Neither concern for Church order nor questions of the continuity of the present Church with its past tradition are very important. Ecumenical covenants and schemes, and questions of catholicity tend to receive little support.

On the other hand, there are those who place the emphasis on the catholicity of the Church and a concern for the continuity and integrity of the Christian community through time and space. Here, "new creation" can be either be downplayed or subsumed into "Church" (as in Loisy's famous remark that "Jesus proclaimed the kingdom and it was the Church that came"). Such an anxiety for catholicity need not be divorced from questions of kingdom values and radical transformation. Nonetheless, the effect is often a taming of the apocalyptic vision, a desire that the present should not be too different from the past rather than an urgent desire that the present should be shaped by the future.

In other words, the phrases "New Creation" and "Catholic Church" exist in a kind of natural tension. Can this tension be in any way resolved? How are past and present, there and here, caught up in a common movement of the Spirit of God? It is a question vividly expressed in the work of Jürgen Moltmann, whose early work, *Theology of Hope* brought the theme of a future-orientated theology back into the mainstream of Western theological thought. In *The Church in the Power of*

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¹ Bloch, 1986, p. 515.

the Spirit, he pleads for an ecclesiology more thoroughly imbued with eschatology. Commenting on the traditional marks of the Church, and observing the ease with which "catholic" is identified with the existing, historical Church, he draws attention to Justin's reference to the "catholic ... resurrection". If "catholic" is to be an eschatological mark of the Church, Moltmann insists, then it must refer to its mission, its apostolate. He says that: "The goal of the church's mission remains universal. In the new people of God the divisions that destroy mankind will already be deprived of their force here and now. The barrier which people set up against each other, in order to maintain their own position and to put down others, will be broken down through mission and fellowship"².

What, then, would true catholicity be like, in the light of God's new creation, and how would new creation receive a catholic spirit?

1 New Creation Catholicity would consist of a genuine inclusiveness of all humanity's diversity: ethnic and linguistic, geographical and economic, cultural and gendered. It would be a Pentecost catholicity rather than a Babel catholicity. A Babel Catholicity would be more like a global corporation – a MacDonaldisation of Christianity, where it was a product available everywhere with some kind of consistency and some way of making each branch accountable to the centre. There is a danger that catholic ecclesiology and ecumenical concern for unity can be a renewal of Babel (as Karl Barth pointed out in his address to the inaugural Assembly of The World Council of Churches³). That is, it can attempt to build human community and human unity without understanding that both are God's gift. The identification of the Church with God's new creation makes such a Babel catholicity impossible. Stanley Hauerwas has drawn this out with typical passion and clarity:

"At Pentecost God created a new language, but it was a language that is more than words. It is instead a community whose memory of its savior creates the miracle of being a people whose very differences contribute to their unity.

We call this new creation, *church*. It is constituted by word and sacrament, as the story we tell, the story we embody, must not only be told but enacted. In the telling we are challenged to be a people capable of hearing God's good news such that we can be a witness to others. In the enactment, in Baptism and Eucharist, we are made part of a common history that requires continuous celebration to be rightly remembered.

....The creation of such a people is indeed dangerous, as we know from Babel. For the very strength that comes from our unity has too often led the church to believe that it can build the tower of unity through our own efforts. Not content to wait, in time we try to make God's unity a reality for all people through coercion rather than witness."⁴

2 Conversely, a catholic understanding of God's new creation will see that new creation represented in a living human community that keeps alive the Christian hope. It will find in baptism a participation in Christ's death and resurrection, as well as a sharing in the ongoing mission of the Church. Though baptismal regeneration has sometimes been a controversial doctrine for Methodists, it has a key part to play in linking the themes of "New Creation" and "Catholic Church". As the contemporary worship song puts it:

"I am a new creation, no more in condemnation
Here in the grace of God I stand."

In other words, baptism really does make a difference. It is the effective sign of membership in that universal community which represents and is on a pilgrimage towards the new creation.

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² Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, London, SCM, 1977, p. 351.

³ There is a graphic description of Barth "shaking a prophetic finger of warning" in *The First Assembly of the World Council of Churches, The Official Report*, ed. W.A. Visser 't Hooft, London, SCM, 1949, p. 32.

⁴ Hauerwas, *The Church as God's New Language; The Hauerwas Reader*, Duke University Press, 2001, pp.142-162 (originally published in *Scriptural Authority and Narrative Interpretation*, ed. Garrett Green, Fortress, 1986, p. 149).

It is interesting that in many societies (in the early colonisation of the Americas, for example) legislation was passed to ensure that Christian baptism did not change a person's status as a slave. What a sad perversion of the theology of baptism and the concept of Church! New Creation requires, and is represented by, a new community; those who were once no people are now a people. They are so because of God's redemptive love in Christ, made present in the Spirit. To be "in communion" with other members of the catholic Church involves sharing the eucharist - a visible sign of participation in the new creation. To speak of the catholicity of the Church is, at least in part, to indicate that there is more to the renewal of creation than a recognition of common humanity and the world's essential goodness.

3 The existence of a community that represents the hope of new creation carries with it the invitation to share in this new creation: repent, believe and be baptized.

To speak of a truly catholic Church in the light of the new creation entails the universal scope of mission and evangelism. It means taking seriously John R. Mott's famous phrase, "The evangelisation of the world in this generation." Often misunderstood as an attempt to make the boundaries of the Church and the boundaries of the human community coterminous, it is in fact a call for the Church so to witness to God's new creation that all are able to respond. This is a Catholic understanding of evangelism, taking its cue from the fact that "in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek ..." and bearing witness to the universal scope of the Christian community. As the 1910 Edinburgh missionary conference declared:

"A programme literally world-wide in its scope is indispensable to enrich and complete the Church. Jesus Christ must have all the races and all the nations through which to make known fully His excellencies and to communicate adequately His power. Informed, transformed, enlightened, enlivened by the reception of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, Asia, Africa and Oceania will surely exercise a profound influence upon the western Church and help greatly to enlarge and enrich its conceptions of Christ and His Kingdom."⁵

A truly catholic Church is one whose vision of universality is inspired and sustained by the hope of God's new creation.

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⁵ *The Opportunity and the Urgency of Carrying the Gospel to all the Non-Christian World* in , *Carrying the Gospel*, Proceedings of the World Missionary Conference, 1910, Vol. 1, pp. 46f.