# Chapter 15

# CREATION AND THE PERPETUITY OF THE UNIVERSE

## 1. CRISIS

The formulation which left a tremendous imprint on the philosophical understanding of the Christian thinkers' idea of creation, and subsequently on the entire theological concept of creation, was the doctrine of St. Thomas Aquinas. This was of course an outcome of the enormous authority he enjoyed, and later of the fact that for a long time the Thomist philosophy was treated as well-nigh the Church's official philosophy. As regards the creation issue, St. Thomas was not an original thinker. Nearly all the components of his doctrine *de creatione* had already appeared in the thought of the Fathers of the Church and the theologians. What he accomplished was significant because he developed and systematised what had been achieved before him, and because he adapted the traditional doctrine to the needs of the times. This kind of updating of philosophical (and theological) ideas is extremely important for their continuation.

The situation St. Thomas encountered was absolutely dramatic, and it was precisely the problem of creation that was lodged in the very centre of the controversy. Prior to the thirteenth century theology had been practised in the Augustinian tradition, with strong Neo-Platonic highlights. It had elaborated its own picture of a world made up of components of Greek cosmology, and items derived from the Bible, all heavily seasoned with religious reflection which played the part of a bonding agent giving the whole the semblance of synthesis. Quite understandably, the idea of creation played a central role in that "synthesis."



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Frequently the created world would be treated as a symbol of God, which led to situations in which approaches with a mystical tendency assumed the form of philosophical or theological discourse.[1] This was prompted by the metaphorical content of Plato's *Timaios*, which constituted the principal source of information on Nature. The only commentary to the *Timaios* known at the time (and in any case incompletely), by Chalcidius, was an additional factor corroborating this trend. The Platonic myth of a Demiurge creating the world out of ever-existing, chaotic matter could be readily refashioned into the Christian version of Creation, while Plato's concept of the ever-existing ideas could be treated simply as an anticipation of the concept of the primacy of spirit over the material world.

Not surprisingly, in the thirteenth century, when Europe started to recuperate Greek and Byzantine learning based on the Aristotelian corpus of knowledge thanks to the mediation of the Arabs and with important enhancements from them, a strong reaction was inevitable. The new, more rational picture of the world posed a threat to the old image, and to the theology attached to it – or so it seemed. But the new teaching proved too much of an attraction for the philosophers and recently founded university centres for the effective defence in the long run of the "old order."

The works of Aristotle, recovered first thanks to Arabic translations from the Greek, later from the Arabic into Latin, and finally directly from the Greek, became the mainstay of the "new science," while the Arabic commentaries to them engendered a natural wave of interest. The Arabian philosopher Averroes was soon recognised as one of the best commentators. However, his assertions included not only the hypothesis of an ever-existing world, which was a reiteration from Aristotle but put more emphatically, but also other statements in conflict with Christian doctrine, such as, for example, the claim that there existed a single, collective intellect, which seemed to stand in opposition to the concept of free will. When the "Latin Averroist" movement started gaining more and more ground, its adherents appreciating the authority of Aristotle to such an extent that they became liable to allegations of subscribing to a "theory of double truths" (the truth of science and the truth of religion), a series of condemnations of the new philosophy erupted, the most renowned of which was the condemnation in 1277 by Etienne Tempier, Bishop of Paris, of 219 theses considered Averroist. One of them was the thesis of the world's existence forever.[2]

Christian thought found itself facing a crisis. It was already threatened with a disaster, which ensued four centuries later in a divergence of paths for ecclesiastical thinking and scientific thinking. St. Thomas was one of those who managed to avert the danger.

## 2. A PROBLEMATIC SITUATION

In Greek Antiquity the opinion that the universe had always been in existence was well-nigh instinctive. People's conviction that things had always been as they were at that moment was reinforced by the awareness that astronomical observations, which had been conducted for a long time, had not managed to discover any changes in the regular motions of the celestial bodies. That was the argument to which Aristotle resorted. The idea of the eternal existence of the universe was additionally supported by the belief held by the Greek philosophers that the heavenly bodies were composed of an unchanging and indestructible "fifth substance" or quintessence, in contrast to the four elements (earth, water, air, and fire) making up the "sublunary world." Plato had presented this idea in the *Timaios*. It was one of those concepts based on very superficial observations which stick in people's imaginations, to such an extent that they are later used to interpret and "explain" many other phenomena.

The ancient Greeks were not familiar with the concept of creation in the sense applied later by Christian thinkers. The closest to the latter was Plato's concept, according to which the Demiurge had "created" the world out of the always existing, chaotic matter. The term "created" is justified here insofar as for Plato chaos meant not so much disorder, as something on the border of existence and non-existence.

St. Thomas took a serious approach to these (and other) arguments for an ever-existing world, although he was sceptical about some of them. For example, to Aristotle's argument that generations of astronomers had failed to observe changes in the movement of the celestial bodies, he said that much more time might be required for such observations, just as no changes may be observed in a man's appearance over a period of two or three years, but that length of time was quite sufficient to observe a change in the appearance of a dog.[3]

We must also bear in mind that for St. Thomas and his contemporaries the question of whether the world had always existed or had a beginning was not just a cosmological issue, but was also integrally connected with the philosophy of God. Or, to put it more precisely, the problem of God was part of the contemporary cosmology. Hence the frequent recurrence in Aquinas' reflections of the questions whether the world was an ever-existing emanation of the Divine, and whether God could have been idle before the Creation. The former alluded to Neo-Platonic attitudes, whereas the latter was a reformulation of St. Augustine's question: "What was God doing before He created the world?" The solution to the first question was to get an appropriate definition of the concept of Creation;

the solution to the latter one was the right concept of time and eternity. This boiled down to a slightly more Aristotelian reformulation of St. Augustine's opinion: time was a measurement of motion, and since there had been no physical motion prior to the Creation, therefore time did not exist either; hence it was absurd to ask for the existence of anything at all *before* the Creation.

## 3. *CONTRA MURMURANTES. . .*

Among St. Thomas' many monumental works there is a short treatise which has not even been reliably dated and amounts to less that twenty pages of print, but which would be quite sufficient to dub its author an outstanding thinker. Tradition has supplemented its official title, *De Aeternitate Mundi* (On the Eternity of the World) with a sub-heading *Contra Murmurantes* (Against the Mutterers), which definitely shows that many of its readers did not take too kindly to it. Even today the main thesis proposed in this little treatise could prove a revelation for many engaged in discussions for or against Creation – if they knew of it. The thesis is as follows: we should distinguish between the idea of the creation of the world from that of its beginning; it is possible to claim without being self-contradictory that the world was (or more precisely – is being) created by God, but that it never had a beginning (in other words has always existed).

This idea was first put forward by the Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides (1138–1204). St. Thomas' treatise might have been a reply to the sharp criticism of the Aristotelian thesis that the world had always existed, levied by St. Bonaventure and other Franciscans. This would argue for a later date (around 1270) for the treatise, although some specialists are inclined to ascribe it to an earlier period.

To appreciate the precision of St. Thomas's exposition, we first have to get through the barrage of obstacles that separates our way of thinking from the way people thought in those times. We have to realise that what we regard as thinking "within a particular system" (of Aristotelian and Christian ideas) for Thomas was simply "objective thinking." But as we get to grips with *De Aeternitate Mundi* we do not have to accept Thomas's systemic principles (although we do have to understand them) in order to see the play of ideas in his train of reasoning. Nothing helps in understanding an idea (and our aim is to understand the idea of creation) more than unravelling the chains of deduction enveloping that idea.

St. Thomas's point of departure in *De Aeternitate Mundi* is the conviction that the world was created by God. Thomas knows this as a Christian theologian, but also as a philosopher, since according to his views, the world is not a self-subsisting being, therefore it must have been given its existence, in other

words created (here we are already entering the system of Thomist ideas). Thomas does not give grounds for this thesis: he did that elsewhere.[4] He has a different purpose: he wants to show that it is possible for the universe to have been created but still to have always been in existence. This can be done by showing that a "created universe" and one which "has always been in existence" are not self-contradictory.[5] In other words the meaning of these concepts has to be examined and checked to see if there is anything in them which is self-contradictory. Since Thomas and his contemporary readers had no serious problems with accepting the idea of a universe that had always been in existence, the analysis should start with a review of the concept of creation.

St. Thomas had inherited his concept of creation from the Fathers of the Church, particularly from St. Augustine, to whom he made frequent reference, and the earlier Scholastic tradition. His own contribution consisted chiefly in the expression of this concept in terms of the Aristotelian metaphysics. In that metaphysics the most profound core of existence is the substance, as is well-known. What determines the nature of a being is its substance. All the rest are merely accidents, existing only because they are "rooted" in the substance. To express the radical nature of the act of creation, Thomas says it is "the production of the whole substance of a thing."[6]God's causal creative act touches the very substance of things; without His action substance would be nothing. The consequence of this is that in the act of creation there is no "time interval" between the working of the cause and the effecting of its result, as may sometimes happen with mechanical causes. The act of creation is immediate; the creative cause need not precede its effect in the temporal sense. That is why we may envisage a created universe which nonetheless has been in existence, without risking self-contradiction. Creation need not assume a temporal beginning of the universe.

The operation of any finite cause (viz. all causes except for God) results in its effect by bringing about a change in the already existing material. The creative act does not bring about such a change; instead it brings about the coming into existence of the entire substance of a being which would otherwise not be there at all. In this sense creation is "the producing of something out of nothing." Not as if nothingness were the material from which something has been made, but because in the act of creation there is no material at all.

St. Thomas tells us that if we speak of a created world which may have always been in existence, we do not mean this in the sense of it having its existence "of itself" (thanks to itself), but in the sense that the world would be nothing if it were not for the act of creation.[7]

Towards the end of his treatise St. Thomas supports his argument with references from two authorities: St. Augustine and Boethius. From Augustine's

*De Civitate Dei* Thomas borrows a corroborating example: Let us imagine a man standing barefoot on sand forever. The footprint he makes in the sand is there forever, too, "but no-one would cast doubt on the fact that the footprint is being impressed by the man standing there."[8]

His reference to Boethius is to the latter's "definition" of God's eternity as "the entire and perfect possession of endless life at a single instant." A world which had always been in existence would merely be ever-existing, but not eternal, since eternity is proper only to God. His extra-temporal existence does not extend to all the passing moments of time, as would be the case with a world that had been in existence for all time. Therefore there is no danger of ascribing the divine attributes to an ever-existing world.