Book Symposium: Theology of Creation in an Evolutionary World *by Karl Schmitz-Moormann*

KARL SCHMITZ-MOORMANN: OUR INTELLECTUAL LEGACY FROM A GREAT MIND

by John R. Albright

Abstract. Karl Schmitz-Moormann's thought as expressed in his last book exemplifies Catholic theology based on realism, flow, evolution, and free will. Categories of creation are reviewed: from nothing, continuous, called forth, informed, and free.

Keywords: called forth creation; continuous creation; creation from nothing; determinism; free creation; informed creation; Latin; Roman Catholicism; Karl Schmitz-Moormann.

Any book tells its readers a lot about its author, but Karl Schmitz-Moormann's last book, *Theology of Creation in an Evolutionary World* (1997), is an especially clear reflection of its author—his thought, his personality, and his style. We are grateful to James F. Salmon, S.J., and Nicole Schmitz-Moormann for their indispensable work of seeing this volume into print after the author's death in 1996. I begin by describing how Schmitz-Moormann's intellect lives on in this book.

Schmitz-Moormann was a polymath. There was hardly ever a conversation to which he could not contribute with real strength. He spoke as one with authority—even on those rare occasions when he was wrong. His public presentations were filled with the most varied references, keeping

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his listeners on their toes and delighting them by the sparkle of his learning. His last book displays this aspect of Schmitz-Moormann; it bubbles over with the enthusiasm of erudition, reminding us of lectures past. The book's references to the arts bring to mind the Schmitz-Moormann who used to play the flute of an afternoon in the empty chapel at Star Island.

Another aspect of Schmitz-Moormann was his love of the Latin language. His lectures were filled with quotes of all sorts, which he was always kind enough to translate for those whose linguistic talents did not match his own. His book does not spare the Latin, but the lengthier passages are mostly relegated to endnotes. He clearly believed the principle, "a thing said in Latin is said once and for all" (*Latine dictum, semel dictum*).

Schmitz-Moormann was a lay Catholic theologian. He is open about this fact in his writing, and his attitudes are clear in his book. In Schmitz-Moormann's view, the three most respected and revered theologians—whom he also quotes most frequently—are Thomas Aquinas, Karl Rahner, and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. His liking for Teilhard is certainly in character, since Schmitz-Moormann was deeply involved in the writings of the great French Jesuit paleontologist. Schmitz-Moormann takes great care in this book not to contradict his church, but he is bold enough to complain about its theological stodginess and at the same time quick to praise its strength and flexibility whenever he can. He has little patience with the Protestant slogan "by scripture alone" (*sola scriptura*) and scarcely more with the Catholic notion of "deposit of faith" (*depositum fidei*) that has informed so much post-Tridentine theology. He sees both of these attitudes as unhelpful because they are too close to fundamentalism and hence inimical to the evolutionary perspective of the book.

Presuppositions

The author brought many presuppositions to his work, and it would be well to review some of the more deeply rooted ones.

1. *Science is concerned with reality*. Schmitz-Moormann had great respect for science and took the trouble to learn a lot about it. He disagreed with Karl Barth, because he believed that Barth took the position that theology need not accept information from science. Schmitz-Moormann was also uninterested in Eastern religions, because he claimed that they denied objective reality.

2. *Everything flows*. As a constructive theologian, Schmitz-Moormann was not at root conservative. He may have seemed so in view of his copious quotations from theologians of the past, but he believed in at least the possibility of progress, of change for the better. The commitment of his theology to an evolutionary perspective is evident from the title of this book. He states at the outset that the basic scientific correctness of evolution is not in doubt, and will not be debated. Americans will probably

recognize this attitude as typically European. In his public lectures he emphasized that evolution is not the same as metamorphosis; he was correct, but for many of us the conflation of the two concepts is useful: acceptance of stellar evolution (really stellar metamorphosis) paves the way to acceptance of biological evolution. Once the ubiquity of change in nature is accepted, it is less difficult to abandon the idea of an unchanging deity, and process theology becomes an attractive option. Schmitz-Moormann was aware of this possibility and made the most of it.

3. *Determinism is an illusion*. Although he once wrote a book about probability, Schmitz-Moormann did not really believe in random properties of nature. He was nevertheless opposed to determinism, as his book makes clear. His opposition was based not on any principle of randomness but on the freedom of the will.

4. *Christianity is supremely valuable*. As stated above, Schmitz-Moormann was a loyal Catholic. He accepted and prized the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation and insisted on the primacy of *agape*, Christian love.

5. *Older is not always better*. Scientists who are newcomers to the science and religion dialogue are nearly always shocked by the propensity of theologians to quote authorities, with the highest reverence accorded to the oldest. From the scientific perspective, it seems as though theologians are too often unwilling to think for themselves. Theologians (and humanists in general) are similarly shocked by the spectacle of the biologist on the faculty library committee who advocates elimination of book purchases so as to maximize the money available for journals, on the basis that once an idea is in a book it is already out of date. From the humanistic perspective, it seems that scientists have no respect for the past. Schmitz-Moormann points out that Tertullian's motto, "earlier is truer" (*id verius quod prius*), will not suffice for a modern thinking theologian. He even goes so far as to suggest "later is truer" (*id verius quod posterius*) as a fitting way to describe scientific processes that advance human understanding of the universe, understanding that must not be ignored by theology. Keep in mind that Schmitz-Moormann was an intense bibliophile who owned thousands of books and was in no way suggesting that libraries should stop acquiring them.

Categories of Creation

Schmitz-Moormann followed the title of his book by using various typologies of creation as a framework. He began with the most traditional types and moved on to newer ways of looking at the theology of creation. It is clear that he felt more affection for the newer than for the older.

"Creation from nothing" (*creatio ex nihilo*) has long been the standard paradigm for Christian theology of creation. Although there is no explicit formulation of this idea in the canonical Old Testament, it became the

normative interpretation to say that God created the heavens and the earth (as in Genesis 1:1) out of no preexistent matter. In our day this doctrine has undergone an onslaught from both biblical scholars and scientists. The traditionalist claim is that the oldest scriptural passage supporting "from nothing" is at 2 Maccabees 7:28, New Revised Standard Version: "look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed." In the HarperCollins Study Bible, Daniel J. Harrington's footnote to this passage reads, "it need not be taken as a philosophical statement of 'creation out of nothing' (Latin *creatio ex nihilo*), though it has often been interpreted in that way." Biblical scholars have also taken great care to point out that Genesis 1:2 does not require a doctrine of "from nothing."

Scientists have a long history of resisting "from nothing." The early-nineteenth-century geologists were fond of uniformitarianism, maintaining that the earth is not just old, it has existed in more or less the same form from eternity. This attitude had to be changed as a result of later discoveries, which have placed the age of the earth at about 4.5 (American) billion years, old but not infinitely old. As recently as the 1960s the Big Bang model was rejected by many serious cosmologists, in part because scientific materialism calls for conservation of mass (hence, the matter we observe could never have been created), and in part because the cosmologists believed that the Big Bang is too consonant with Christianity.

Schmitz-Moormann correctly realized that establishment of "from nothing" is more interesting scientifically than theologically; science does not really know how the universe came to be, even granted the correctness of the Big Bang paradigm. Debates about the nature of the very early universe cannot be settled by science at this time because (1) a compelling theory of quantum gravity has not yet been formulated, and (2) observations cannot determine whether the total energy of the universe is positive (heat death) or negative (big crunch). Schmitz-Moormann also correctly realized that Pope Pius XII was premature in his espousal of Big Bang cosmology as the scientific theory of origins most consonant with Christianity.

Continuous creation (*creatio continua*) is traditionally the opposite of "from nothing" (*ex nihilo*). In this model creation is going on all the time. For a theist such as Schmitz-Moormann, this circumstance is not as repulsive, because God could be acting in the world by either creating new matter or rearranging preexistent matter. In this light biological evolution could be seen as God's creative activity. Before the 1960s anti-Big Bang scientists used the idea of the continual creation of matter as a means of explaining the observed Hubble expansion of the galaxies. But Schmitz-Moormann did not jump at "continuous" (*continua*) as have certain other theologians quoted in his book. Instead he moved forward to describe three newer categories of creation.

The concept of creation as "called forth" (*creatio appellata*) can subsume both of the traditional categories just considered. God calls forth the universe into existence from nonexistence. God calls forth the organization of matter into stars and galaxies. God calls forth the solar system, including the Earth. God calls forth life on our planet. God calls forth the evolution of life-forms into the astonishing diversity that we see today. God calls forth human beings as the most complex of created life-forms. God calls forth human societies in their diversity. Without losing the majestic insight of "from nothing," we gain the caring God who continues to work in the world. The connection of all this with process theology should once again be noted.

The concept of a creation that has been "informed" (*creatio informata*) is a logical next step for Schmitz-Moormann. Creation that is called forth could be described traditionally as called forth by name (the Latin verb *appellare* supports this meaning), and the traditional concept of *Logos* (the Word, as in John 1:1) is seen as information added to the universe by God. Schmitz-Moormann had strong interest in information as a scientific and technical construct and also in its implications for theology. At the third European Conference on Science and Theology, at Geneva, Switzerland, in 1990, Schmitz-Moormann was convener for one of the workshops, The Evolution of Coding Systems and Their Interpretation and Information in Biological Systems. He also contributed a paper, "The Evolution of Information."

An informed creation is one that clearly avoids the pitfalls of reductionism and deism. If God made the universe to run on microscopic principles—the laws of physics—and thereafter paid no more attention to it, then the reductionist or bottom-up line of reasoning would be sufficient. Many scientists, especially physicists and molecular biologists, believe in this kind of reductionism with almost religious fervor. Most humanists, including theologians, use "reductionist" as an insult to hurl at scientists. Introduction of "being informed" (*informata*) allows for top-down causation without losing the very real benefits of scientific reductionism. God can inform the universe in any direction whatsoever.

At this point in the development Schmitz-Moormann could have greatly expanded on the informational value of complexity. After all, Teilhard used the term to good effect (as noted in the book) to point out that evolution tends to favor increasing complexity, culminating with humans. Instead the book moves to its end with another wonderful type of creation.

"Free creation" (*creatio libera*) is the category that arrives at the close of the book. The Creator has chosen to permit the existence of suffering and death, including the vast amount of both entailed in biological evolution. Schmitz-Moormann asks whether God may have paid too high a price for this freedom. But of course the answer is that God paid even more: God's son, the Word, was sent to earth to assume human form and to experience

the pain and death that are characteristic of our part of the universe. God could have done such a thing only through love.

Love ties together (note that the Latin verb *religare*, "to tie back together," gave us the English word *religion*) the notions of calling and freedom: "The creation that exists only because it is called forth by the loving Creator reaches in the human being the ability to accept or to refuse God's offer of love. . . . Everything in this universe is held in existence by God's grace, God's love" (1997, 145).

Karl Schmitz-Moormann has given us a wonderful legacy on which to ponder and to build new constructs of theology. As in his work, we will need to have science in, with, and under the theological edifice.

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