Creation. For Jonathan Edwards, this world is full of God's glory. As a great orchestra, the complete cosmos celebrates the glory of the Creator and each creature has its own harmonious place in this orchestra. This approach has to be distinguished from a concept of common grace in which a general presence of God's goodness in creation is acknowledged. The theologian of Northampton went a step further, because his understanding of theology is rooted in beauty and he is convinced that God communicates his beauty in creation, especially in relations between human beings and other creatures.

In this context it is understandable that Edwards understood creation ex nihilo as the emanation of God's glory. Instead of speaking about one moment of creation, Edwards used the concept of continuous creation to underline the continuous dependence of creation on the Creator as the only real being, to express that creation does not add anything to the Creator, to connect creation and the upholding of creation, to clarify that second causes do not exist without God’s upholding natural law, and to confess the constant overflow of God's fullness in his creation. At the same time, this approach clarifies that Edwards dissociated himself from deism and that God was not “a god of the gaps,” but his cosmos is continually sustained by him and his presence.

Unconverted people can see the beauty of creation, but by sin the natural senses are corrupted, so that they are satisfied with material reality. Therefore, the real access to this mystery of God in creation is not by the natural senses, but by the new sense, a central concept in Edwards' spirituality. By the indwelling of the Spirit in the hearts of believers, believers get a new sense of reality. The natural senses are included in this new sense, so that believers see the beauty of God in nature. In Edwards's personal life, the new sense gave him this access to the beauty of God's creation. Just after his conversion, for example, he saw God's wisdom and love in the sun and the moon, the trees and the grass, the thunder and the lightning.

This understanding of creation implies that it is filled with images of God's glory. Natural beauty, goodness, satisfaction, wisdom, harmony and order are expressions of God. Especially the harmony of music refers to God, his ontology and his soteriological work. For this reason Edwards did not only find typology in Scripture, but he very much sees types of God, Christ and the Spirit and his work in natural phenomena, because the cosmos participates in God and because this creation serves redemption. It is remarkable that Edwards for these types in creation did not only refer to God in general, but also to the glory of Christ especially.
In a certain way Edwards’s view can be likened to a Platonic sacramental understanding of creation, such that God is present in physical nature. This implies firstly that there is a participation in the Creator in the way of participation in creation, because God communicates his own beauty in his creation. Secondly, this implies that the sensory experience of the beauty of creation deepens the spiritual longing of the heart for the Creator, for rest in the divine and the contemplation of it.

Edwards's sensitivity to the beauty of creation had two other effects. On the one hand, this sensibility made him open to scientific research and technological development. Science and faith are not exclusive for him, but these different aspects of God's works are related to and consonant with each other. We can readily see Edwards's positive attitude towards science and research: he accepts Newtonian physics and the heliocentric worldview without any reserve. Apart from the intrinsic value of science and knowledge, Edwards expected that God would use scientific and technological developments in his own history with his world, with its climax in the millennium.

On the other hand, this positive attitude made him sensible of human misuse of God's creation, so that he has an understanding of suffering from natural life. Among his sermon manuscripts, for example, is one on Rom. 8:22 with the doctrine: “The whole creation does as it were groan under the sins of wicked men” (no. 445, Sept. 1737).

In this context it is not less remarkable that continuity between this creation and recreation is lacking. Edwards did not believe in the continuation of creation, but he expected the annihilation of the physical world. This is not motivated by evil in history, but by the fulfillment of God's plan for his world. It clarifies that God created the world for the purpose of redemption. This means that God’s aim in creation was in a certain sense supralapsarian, subordinated to redemption, and that Edwards’ doctrine of redemption can better be described as a redemption out of the world instead of a redemption of the world. In this context it is significant that Edwards had the plan to write a book on systematic theology in the perspective of the History of Redemption, in which redemption is the encompassing theme.

There is another remark to be made. Deeper behind this structures of Edwards's thoughts about the annihilation of creation, we have to point to his immaterialism or idealism. According his deepest understandings, this world exists as ideas in the mind of God. So, the material world does not have an intrinsic value, but rather spiritual reality is the deepest essence of reality.
Moreover, this relativization of material reality does not imply a denial of the bodily resurrection of the saints. In the Second Coming of Jesus at the end of time, their bodies will be quickened as bodies with new qualities and they will meet him in the air, as Jesus was bodily taken up in heaven. Then, God will communicate his glory fully with the redeemed and God’s glory will be their happiness.

Willem van Vlastuin

Further Reading

