Creativity, God and Persons

JAMES A. KIRK

SEVERAL years ago the American theologian Shailer Mathews defined God as "the personality producing and personally responsive aspects of our total environment." Some time before that, an earlier, unknown writer said:

> In the beginning was the Word,
> And the Word was with God,
> And the Word was God.
> He was in the beginning with God;
> All things were made through him,
> And without him was not anything made that was made.
>
> In him was life,
> And the life was the light of men.
> The light shines in the darkness,
> And the darkness has not overcome it. (John 1:1-5)

In two quite different generations, for two rather different audiences, and in terms of two different but remarkably suggestive patterns of ideas, men were speaking of an intimate internal connection among their convictions about God, about themselves, and about the creation of the context in which they found themselves involved. I am not particularly interested in arguing the particular merits of either interpretation, but I am very much interested in the problem with which both patterns of ideas attempt to deal. There seem to be four focii of interest in each pattern—(1) the concept of God, (2) the concept of man or person, (3) the concept of creation, and (4) the unique interrelation of these three concepts together into some pattern of wholeness or integrity.

The problem begins with an experience, the complex but fundamental experience of being a person who lives in a world that includes other persons. As a philosophical game one can deny the reality of this experience and the assumptions which give it meaning, but it is difficult to live on the basis of denying one's own existence. If one is prepared to accept the implication from experience that we are persons living with other persons in a context that is largely not of our own making, one then turns to other questions, such as, "Why?" "For what purpose?" or "How did it happen?" We may or may not be able to answer such questions satisfactorily, but being persons we feel compelled to wonder about them. It is this habit of wondering in this way, this "ultimate concern" which has been institutionalized as religion. Occasionally the wonder has been extinguished by the institution it creates, but when the flame of curiosity has been extinguished from institutional religion it usually breaks out anew in some other dimension of man's experience and men are called again to consider their origin and their destiny and the significance which lies between. If man may be defined as **homo faber,** the tool maker, he also may be spoken of as **homo curiosus,** the wonderer. It may be true that our basic curiosity is seldom satisfied but this does not prevent us from being curious. Man has gained tremendously in knowledge in the past several thousand years, but it would be hard to demonstrate that his curiosity has been diminished or that the attitude of wonderment has been rendered obsolete.

When men have wondered religiously about these fundamental questions of origin, destiny and meaning, they have almost always produced a system of devotion to that which they believe has

JAMES A. KIRK is Assistant Professor of Religion, The University of Denver, and member of the Visiting Faculty, The Iliff School of Theology.

produced and sustained them, in terms of which worthwhile living becomes possible. It is not our purpose to produce a catalog of the ideas to which men have devoted themselves. When we consider the values rather than the content of such ideas, we find that they tend to be the most inclusive ideas of which men are aware; they provide a massive sense of perspective. Secondly, this perspective is one in terms of which one can orient his life; his devotion to this perspective changes his way of looking at things. Thirdly, this perspective affords some sense of permanence amid the flux and evanescence of one's experience. Let it be granted that in this process men have come up with some remarkably innane ideas, it may also be granted that the simple suppression of curiosity about the meaning of life is equally absurd. Life will be made to fit some context whether it be small or large: it will reveal some pattern whether it be adequate or atomistic. Man's religious yearnings cannot be crushed merely by insisting that they are inadequately realized. In most cases profound religious thinkers have been aware of that inadequacy from the very beginning.

The questions which disturb and stimulate us at this point are first of all those concerned with creation. The experience from which this perplexity arises is the experience of a created universe, that is the experience of personal and social existence in which creations normally imply creators. The early Hebrews, of course, never really debated the issue, but adopted as a keystone of faith the assertion that:

"In beginning God created the heavens and the earth." (Genesis 1:1) This, to them, was a simple assumption, direct, immediate, and undebatable, an absolutely necessary affirmation based upon the experience that there was in fact a universe in which human enjoyment takes place. Aristotle was much more subtle in his arguments, but the conclusion is virtually the same. All events have causes. The universe is an event. Therefore the universe has a cause. But to escape the problem of an infinite regression of causes, the cause of the universe must either be self-causing or uncaused, and therefore it must be perfect in a way in which the universe is not. The Prime Cause, the Unmoved Mover, is God. The whole argument moves in a context of assumptions which are no longer necessarily compelling, but even when the ancient answers cease to satisfy the ancient curiosity springs up anew. Whatever may be said about how it happened or the correctness of any of our theories of development (evolutionary or otherwise), man and society have appeared, not in an abstract or essentialist sense but in concrete individuality, uniqueness and opportunity. Man also finds that he participates in processes which produce other persons not unlike himself, realize other hopes not unlike his own. The concrete origin of a life is in the mating of a man and a woman and in their care for the helpless and utterly dependent infant which has been produced. Moving back through the list of ancestors we find an arithmatical progression of ancestors in each generation, and at the same time an increasing concentration of the racial stock. Imagine any shift in this genetic heritage and the world would have to get by without us in our particular unique concatination of possibilities. We may be grateful that no ancient Puritans ever really repudiated sex even, though finding it a vital link in the rhythms of nature and a direct participation in creativity itself, they may have surrounded it with what may seem to be excessive restrictions and taboos. The man who wonders about his origins seriously is soon led to a more inclusive appreciation of the interrelated functioning which makes his presence and his wondering possible. The individual who thinks he is a "self made man" does not know the simplest facts

of life. Whether one emerges with a conception of a God who creates by fiat or will or perhaps with an awareness of the complexity of creativity itself, one is led to contemplate a context as massive as the universe, as mysterious and complex as the union of a sperm and egg and the growth of a child, as objective as the chemical constitution of sea water or the distance from a planet to the sun and the consequent radiation and temperature levels. The concept of creation may or may not involve the concept of a personal God, but if undertaken seriously it must involve a perspective larger than human interests, pleasures or desires. It is a perspective both objective and subjective, to be understood as we understand gas laws and nuclear fission, to be made meaningful as we use this understanding to select and achieve goals. It is a perspective to which we must adjust ourselves and yet also one which is appreciable for itself. It is a perspective, however, which becomes fully meaningful only when we are able to specify some of the particular relationships and qualities which emerge within it. For example, the dependence of creatures suggests the necessity of the relationship of love; the growth of autonomy and creative capacity in the individual suggest the necessity of the relationship of personal responsibility; the intimate interrelatedness in the economy of nature suggests the relationship of reverence for life. It is at this point that the concept of creativity begins to fill the concept of God with meaning. **Homo curiosus** enters the religious dimension of his personality whenever he wonders in any profound sense, from whence has he come.

Wondering where we have come from is an initial step in wondering who we are. Just as the pondering of our origin leads outward to an awareness of the creative and sustaining forces of life, so the perplexity concerning our identity leads toward recognition of and sensitivity to other relationships. This awareness has both an internal and an external development.

Who am I? Looking inward in the effort to understand my self-consciousness, I become aware not so much of a unified, coherent, clearly organized core of self-identity as of a kind of ininternal combat, the tug and haul of various impulses, habits, memories, desires, fears. Many of these factors I recognize and think that I know their origin. There is the singe of pain from burned fingers that arouses fear in me as I watch children playing with the same old fires. There is the stricture, the unexplained warning, "Don't do that!"—in which I seem to hear the voices of mother and father, teachers and counsellors, policemen and the "older, wiser ones." Or there are similar imperatives to wash my hands, brush my teeth, tell the truth, from similar sources. Looking inward I seem to see a gradual accumulation of habits and tendencies, achievements and failures—the encouragement of a second grade art teacher and the discouragement of repeated defeats in physical combat, which undoubtedly led to the further encouragement of academic (non-combatant) success and discouragement in physical competition, and then onward to a preliminary vocational choice in art and engineering and then later in academic life. Those decisions which made me writhe with uncertainty and perplexity at the time now appear hardly to be decisions at all, but simply the unavoidable consequences of earlier habits, values and expectations. But my introspection reveals not only that I am the product of factors of varying force and intensity from my actual experience and opportunities in the past. There is also an awareness of an inner self which does not bear the shackles of conformity to norms or possibilities. In this flighty inner life I do not get pushed around, but control my destiny. Not even the law of gravity applies to me there un-

less I wish it to. I conquer worlds, astound the nation, possess the princess and amaze and delight everyone with my knowledge, power, charm and humility. But that fantastic world of my imagination is me too. There is a depth to every Walter Mitty which no one else can ever really know and which Walter is not about to discuss with us. Yet this inner life of fantasy does come to the surface in behavior—rather directly in day and night dreams, but also in the tears aroused by a novel or movie, the harsh laughter of bitter humor, the meaning of color, sound, movement and shape. It comes out in the irrational hesitation and procrastination whereby we show that the daily acts of life do not express our more genuine and significant self—but since that is a self of indescribable fantasy we dare admit only the guilt of our procrastination, not its cause. It is out of this life of fantasy and imagination that many of our most basic wishes, desires and drives are formed. These wishes and drives clash immediately with one another and with our awareness of our history and habits, of the possibilities of the world of men and nature. They are not fulfilled because they could not be, since they take no immediate account of possibility. They are, however, realized in part and in transformed modes. The psychoanalysts have not really shown us something basically new about ourselves by showing how these dynamic powers thrust toward fulfillment in behavior. They have actually shown us that these forces are far more extensive than those of which we can be immediately aware and that they result in symptoms which at first may seem far removed from fantasy and wish fulfillment. They also have shown us, however, that there is sometimes a therapeutic relationship between the **awareness** of these forces and the **symptoms** in behavior.

Introspection shows me to be somehow a complex unity of internalized history, habits, hopes, fantasies, drives, frustrations, transformations, and I am led to believe that each person is very much the same. In a sense I **am** all that I have been, felt or hoped to be—which means, of course, that I am very confused. My identity is tied up with past and future relationships, but my life is in the present. The examination of that life cannot be conducted solely by introspection because it is a life of relationships to and with others. Its examination involves a broadening rather than a narrowing of the perspective.

Persons seem to vary tremendously in the type and number of meaningful relationships which they establish. Probably no universal patterns hold true, but perhaps certain general characteristics can be identified which are rather common.

Life involves relationships of dependence. Throughout the whole of life we are dependent upon a reasonably stable environment, both natural and social. Maturing is in part the loosening of relationships of dependence by the assumption of increasing areas of responsibility. This process, however, seldom goes so far that all dependence is lost. Some forms of dependence are transferred—from parent to teacher, to boss (or other authority figure), to mate, even to children. Life is possible only in a context in which we are in fact interdependent and life is fully functioning only where this dependence and its correlate responsibility are at least partially recognized.

Life involves relationships of response. Our self-image, as it gradually matures, is formed partly by our estimate of ourselves in the light of the way others respond to us. The meaning of this response of others is never given to us directly, its meaning for us is derived from the **way we perceive** the response. But our perception (apart perhaps from neurotic or psychotic conditions) utilizes **clues** in the responses we perceive to arrive at some meaning. We are always engaged in "reading be-

tween the lines" in people's responses, perhaps seriously distorting them, perhaps interpreting them with reasonable accuracy, but in any case deriving some meaning as a clue to who we are. These interpreted responses combine with our own inner estimates and life history (or accumulate to form them), reinforcing some images, reducing the effectiveness of others. Some responses seem to have an effect completely out of proportion to their apparent significance. Often this may be due to the fact that the response correlates a number of previously unassimilated or unorganized meanings and the reaction occurs in terms of the cumulative effect of all of these forces. It is very common in case studies, for example, to find a sentence which notes an unkind or perhaps a complimentary remark of a teacher, parent, friend or acquaintance made many years earlier and somehow lodged in consciousness as though that one remark alone made a person worthy or a failure, stimulated them to achievement or put the seal on their disgrace. Here one suspects a reinforcing or organizing effect upon barely conscious or subconscious memories. Normally we encounter a great many different responses in the course of any given day. We do not expect them to be completely uniform. Indifference, resentment, hostility, appreciation, casual friendliness, warm acceptance are met by many people daily. We depend not only upon responses but on variety of responses to preserve our sanity and balance. Especially, I believe, we depend upon an alternation of competitive and non-competitive responses. We need some challenge of possible failure to maintain a sense of achievement, but we also need responses which support our deeper hopes and wishes even when competitive success is not obvious. This kind of response is fully possible only with enduring, communicative relationships of shared joy and disappointment. The old proverb about a friend being someone who knows you and likes you anyway speaks of a relationship which often is vital in finding out who we are.

Life involves relationships of stress. We are, in part, what we do and derive our identity in part from our principal activities. Living tissues, organs and persons are active. We seek satisfaction of our variety of wants through activity which itself satisfies wants. This activity normally is our work. Hopefully this work is a meaningful relationship in itself and in the other things it makes possible as well. Since this relationship often comes to occupy the major bulk of our time, energy and interest, it is important that it be made as meaningful as possible.

Life involves recreative relationships. We are, in part, what we enjoy. The constant expense of energy in a very limited number of ways and for a narrow range of goals is exhausting. Life requires the alternation of rest with effort, and florishes with an alternation in the style and goal of action. Such relationships — with other persons, with nature, with sound, color, shape, movement, literary experience—may help to re-create the energy resources, the sense of well being and fulfillment, the awareness of meaningful interpendence. Play and recreation should help to identify who we are and help to re-create our lives on more meaningful levels.

Life involves historical and cosmic relationships. We are, in part, what the universe and human history have made possible for us. We are part of a stream of events and of the sweep of history. We have the impression of incredible insignificance in the massiveness of time, space and history — and yet whatever significance there ever has been has been achieved in and through this context. The assertion by many religions (primitive and modern) that real time begins with some critical moment in the life of that group, that the meaningful center of the universe (if not its actual physical center) is in a place sacred to

them, speaks to a common human awareness. In a universe beyond imagining and a history beyond describing each meaningful event and person has found its place and is interrelated in some fashion with the rest. It is hard to avoid the sense of annihilation by the massiveness or its alternative of arrogant claims to cosmic importance, but we clearly are related to processes which precede, flow through and beyond us and our time and place, and in which significant lives have been lived.

Who are we? We are the complex unity of many relationships—within and without. However we would think of God, if there is to be significance for us in our awarensess of Him, it must be realized though awareness of changing relationships.

Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going? These are the questions we ask in order to find ourselves as persons. The sense of human destiny is difficult to formulate clearly. I take it to arise from the awareness that not all the meaningful events of life are measured by their immediate dimensions. A good deal of elaborate fantasy and hope have entered into the pronouncements concerning human destiny. As the picture of human destiny becomes more specific we often see more clearly the frustrated ambitions of those who draw the pictures, and our scepticism or even cynicism tends to be aroused. In spite of all this, however, there does appear to our awareness two factors which seem to have enduring relevance—the factor of continuity and the factor of mystery. We discover ourselves as complex unities of relationships, but neither the form of unity nor the relationships is static. We live also in time. People make themselves available to us to draw upon their resources of care, affection, knowledge, experience, sensitivity, hope, achievement. We relate to them in mutual interdependence. We make ourselves available to others in similar relationships. Gradually we build or sometimes abruptly change an enduring and organizing core of relationship which identify our character or personality. The meaning of all those relationships is never measurable by the birth and death dates of our biography. It shades off in varying forms of influence, new experience, opportunity and mystery. But it shades with continuity to the core of relationships from which the meanings first emerged. Relationships which have enriched and deepened the awareness of enduring factors tend to enrich and deepen other relationships. Those which have cut us off from more meaningful experience tend toward shallower and shallower significance. There is apparently no just and finely balanced system of reward and punishment in life, but there does seem to be a general continuity of cause and effect which can become awareness of the endurance of more genuine fulfillments. Human destiny is the investment of ourselves in meaningful relationships which outlast our presence on the stage. How far this may go, how much it may mean is lost in mystery.

What is God's relationship to our origin, identity and destiny? This obviously depends greatly upon what one believes about God. A glance at religious history however, suggests that in all the variety of conceptions the concept of God has been closely related to the concept of the creation, meaning and destiny of life. Leaving aside the questions of the metaphysical status of God—his unity or plurality, his substance and attributes, his spatio-temporal locus and physique, his goodness or his power, even his personal or more-than-personal qualities, let us consider the concept of God functionally in relation to the origin, meaning and destiny of life.

God is the ground of being — the source of the relationships of creativity, nurture and interdependence which have given us our being and the chance for significant living. To participate in the life of God—to do his will—to be en-

lightened we must share in and nourish this relationship.

God is the ground of courage—the source of the relationships of self-restraint, conviction and dependence with self-realization whereby the relationships which create and redeem us as persons are formed. The superabundance of desire, the necessity of dependable relationships are enduring in the nature of things. Courage is the acceptance of our inescapable limitations but also our responsibilities in the nature of things. God is that grounded dependability, that enduring continuity in terms of which courage is possible.

God is the ground of meaning—the source of the relationships of response, stress, recreation and history whereby we are called to be growing and responsible persons in a world of other persons, to respond to others and be responded to, to work, to play, to participate creatively in history and appreciatively in nature. To participate in the life of God—to do his will—we enter into those relationships which endure, deepen, enhance and give variety to life.

God is the ground of integrity—the source of the creative and developing unity of life from which our motivations, relationships and meanings arise. His nature or will provides that principle of wholeness which becomes the core of the pattern of each life in so far as this integrity is grounded on something basic in the nature of things and persons.

God is the ground of hope—the source of the confidence that continuity and mystery make possible richer fulfillment rather than annihilation of meaning. It is not necessary for us to understand or be responsible for the ultimate ends of creation. Our responsibility is for the life we have been given, nourished by confidence in the process, relationships and ground from which it arises. Our hope is not founded simply on our own achievement, though it urges us to achieve as much as we can. Our hope is founded on the nature of an enduring and creative God. It is expressed by our desire and willingness to participate in his life—to do his will.

If we had raised the metaphysical questions we would need to discuss much more, especially concerning the correlation of the personal and cosmic dimensions in God. We recognize that different ideas of God emphasize various of these personality creating relationships, and some ideas of God contradict some of them. Our point is not that there is universal agreement on the concept of God as the ground of creativity and personal, meaningful existence, but that serious contemplation of these issues has led many men to identify themselves with God in the quest to understand and fulfill their origin, meaning and destiny.

Still it would appear that in some sense we are free; free to know God as ground of being, courage, meaning, integrity and hope or to form some other pattern for our lives. The ancient writer we quoted at the beginning seemed to be aware of this too, and even suggests a human propensity for trying every other way first. He says simply: "And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light . . . But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God." (John 3: 19, 21)

—JAMES KIRK
Denver University