Module 3: The Theology of childhood - Creation

Over the past two decades, a growing body of literature has emerged on the theology of childhood, much of it from the Protestant tradition although Karl Rahner’s 1971 essay “Ideas for a Theology of Childhood” (Theological Investigations 8) is an important Catholic contribution. This body of literature will be surveyed at the end of this module.

The primary aim of Module 3 is to introduce participants to the fundamental lines of a Catholic theology of the human person, to enable participants to develop a theology of childhood from that perspective. The activities and questions embedded in the module will encourage a constant moving backwards and forwards between key doctrines of the Christian tradition and the contemporary experience of children. The module will focus on three fundamental doctrines – that children are created, that their lives are graced, and that they suffer from the brokenness (original sin) that afflicts
the human condition.

Readings and Activities

In Module 3 you will find links to:

- 13 required readings with activities
- 12 additional non-required extension readings

Learning Outcomes

On successful completion of this module, students should be able to:

1. Apply key biblical and theological insights about creation to their understanding of children and childhood—children as “created in the image of God.”
2. Give an account of the brokenness, limitations, and poverty etc. influencing children’s lives, from the perspective of the Christian doctrine of original sin.
3. Identify the place that children occupied in the gospel accounts of Jesus’ ministry, and explain the liberating potential of his ministry both for children today and for the Christian tradition.
5. Give a nuanced account of children’s experience from the perspective of a contemporary theology of grace, with particular reference to the task of safeguarding children’s wellbeing in Catholic schools.
6. Name and describe a range of contemporary Christian theologies of childhood.
7. Construct an integrated theology of childhood from the perspective of the major doctrines of Catholic faith discussed in this Module, identifying the implications of this theology for the task of safeguarding children’s wellbeing in Catholic schools.

3.1 Children: Created in the Image of God

Every child comes into existence in relationship with God and, from that moment onward, is held in God’s infinite love. This section of Module 3 reflects on the meaning of that fundamental Christian truth—the doctrine of creation. However, thinking about creation is complicated these days. As a result of the journey from the Scientific Revolution (17thC) through the Enlightenment (18thC) and the Industrial Revolution (19thC) to the present, the term “creation” is commonly confused with notions of “making” and “manufacture,” and even with efficient causality. Yet it is absurd to read the biblical creation stories or conceive of the doctrine of creation as if they were aiming at a description on the level of empirical science. As U.S.-based Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart puts it: “The greatest Church Fathers, for instance, took it for granted that the creation narratives of Genesis could not be treated literally, at least not in the sense we give that word today, but must be read allegorically—which, incidentally does not mean read as stories with codes to be decrypted but simply read as stories whose value lies in the spiritual truths to which they can be seen as pointing.”

This section aims to interpret one of the deepest spiritual truths of Christian life.

The following three activities are aimed at leading students to a nuanced account of the biblical and theological meaning of creation. We will survey and compare several biblical theologies of creation, evaluate their implications for our understanding of humanity, and especially discern what they imply about children as created in the image of God. These activities address Module Learning Outcome 1 (MLO1).

3.1.1 Examine and Interpret Genesis

Purpose:
Examine and interpret the Genesis 1 account of creation, particularly its central metaphor of creation as coming to be in relationship with God. This activity addresses one biblical dimension of MLO1.

Resource:

- Genesis 1:1-2:4a

Task:

1. Listen to this evocative reading of the first creation story from the Book of Genesis (Genesis 1:1-2:4a). You might sit meditatively, with your eyes closed. Video link: YouTube.

2. Having listened to the account, ask yourself:
   - What words or images from the account capture my imagination?
   - What important insights or truths does this creation account communicate?


Activity: Theological Insights

According to a distinguished 20thC scholar of Genesis, Claus Westermann, the creation story in Genesis 1 was written by the Priestly writer in the 6thC BCE. It is a narrative, with a beginning, middle, and end; complete in itself. In contrast to other creation narratives from peoples nearby, such as the Egyptian or Babylonian narratives, there is no tension or struggle in the story; nor is there a genealogy of the gods, as was common in the texts of neighbouring peoples.

So, Westermann judges that Genesis 1 was written in dialogue with other traditions, but reflects the message that God has entrusted to Israel. The seven-day time period, and the structure of each day as the text spells it out – Introduction … Command … Completion … Judgment … Time – convey both that time is an expression of God’s action in history, and that every element of creation has a purpose, everything that happens has its source in the word of God’s command.

In Westermann’s reading, Genesis 1 presents a story of cosmos emerging out of chaos—of God’s creative power being manifest in sovereignty over chaos. (See: Claus Westermann, “The Creation of the World.”) Most importantly for our purposes, “creation” is understood in this story as:
1. The initiation and maintenance of relationships of interdependence between God and all of created reality, and
2. God’s commitment to remain faithful.

It is not a story about manufacture but one of relationship. Creation is understood in relational terms.

### 3.1.2 Reflect on theological insights

**Purpose:**

Reflect on the eight key theological insights drawn from the first Genesis creation story. This activity examines theological insights contained in a biblical dimension of MLO1.

**Resource:**


**Task:**

Read Edwards’s chapter and ask yourself:

- Which of these eight insights makes the greatest impact on my understanding of myself and of the whole material universe as created?
- In the light of Genesis 1 and Edwards’s eight points, what do Christians mean when they say that children are created?
- How would I convey to my students this understanding of children as created? How can we understand the task of safeguarding children from this perspective?

### Created in the Image of God

According to the Genesis 1 account, all of creation has its origin in God, and is sustained by God in an ongoing relationship. Yet in this account, as well as that in Genesis 2, humans have a unique role—humanity is created in the image of God. The NRSV translation of Genesis 1:27 reads: “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” Through 2000 years of Christian history theologians have debated what particular aspect of human existence this “image” refers to. Some have focused on the human use of reason, others on humanity’s upright stance; still others on the relationship between body and soul.

Westermann interprets Genesis 1:27’s phrase “image of God” as meaning that God has created humans to live in interrelationship with God. American Catholic theologian John Sachs extends this line of thought, saying: “Human beings are radically different from God but uniquely and intimately related to God, capable of personal relationship with God. According to the Priestly tradition, the human creature is defined primarily in relationship with God”. ²

### 3.1.3 Interpret a key concept

**Purpose:**

To interpret the phrase, “created in the image of God” as in Genesis 1:27. This activity examines a key theological concept contained in MLO1.
3.2 Other Biblical accounts of creation...

While Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 are the most well-known creation accounts, the Bible contains a whole range of such accounts. Others can be found in a number of the Psalms, other Wisdom literature, the Book of Isaiah and, in the New Testament, in the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of John, the Letter to the Romans, and the Letter to the Colossians amongst other books. For a detailed study of some of these texts see Karl Löning and Erich Zenger, To Begin with, God Created. To conclude this section we will briefly focus on the account in Proverbs 8 and that from the Letter to the Colossians.

The creation account in Proverbs 8:22-31 is of interest for several reasons. Spend time reading the text. The Book of Proverbs is a collection of proverbial sayings whose fundamental purpose is to train readers in the way of wisdom, to show what daily life before God is really like. While much of the book is considerably older, chapters 1-9 were probably written after the Exile (539 BCE). Two points stand out in this passage about creation. First, it images a wisdom-figure at work with God in creation. We learn from the text that this figure, “Wisdom,” existed before all things, and is God’s child, companion, and co-worker in the whole of creation. Wisdom is God’s companion, who delights in the inhabited world and the human community. Wisdom is profoundly relational. In the following chapter (9:1-6), Wisdom invites all to a banquet. If we ask “who is Wisdom?” Old Testament scholar Roland Murphy and others respond: Wisdom is the voice of God, the revelation of God, the divine summons issued in and through creation. Many scholars of the Gospel of John regard this passage from the Book of Wisdom and others as formative of that gospel’s Prologue, in which we read: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (1:1), and later “And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (1:14). These scholars find Wisdom literature’s understanding of Wisdom behind John’s use of “Word.” A second major point about the Proverbs 8 text: many scholars point out that the Wisdom-figure is feminine—the “Wisdom Woman.”

Of the creation narratives in the New Testament, perhaps the most prominent is found in the Letter to the Colossians 1:15-20. Read the text of the NRSV translation. While the letter’s authorship is thought to rest with one of the Pauline communities after Paul’s death (70-80 CE), the origins of this hymn are far earlier, in the liturgy of the early church. The fundamental theme of the hymn is the role of Christ in creation, and it begins by stating that Christ is the manifestation of the divine in the world – “He is the image of the invisible God.” The reference to being “first born” means not just temporal priority but sovereignty of rank. The common meaning of “first born” is ruled out in the following verse. The key meaning of the hymn is found in the vision of Christ as the agent and goal of creation – “through him and for him” (the one to whom all things are directed) – and the one in whom creation finds integrity and coherence – “in him all things hold together.” In the context of the hymn’s discussion of thrones, dominions, rulers, and powers, then, the key implication is that Christ is sovereign over the powers of evil that threaten human life.
Franciscan theologian Zachary Hayes sums up the meaning of the Colossians hymn:

This text is the source for what later theologians will call the doctrine of the absolute predestination of Christ. That is, if we ask those theologians why God has created the universe, their response will be the following. God has created so that the sort of union between God and creation may take place which Christians believe has taken place in Christ. God creates so as to bestow the riches of life and love on others and so that creatures may find their fulfillment in a loving union with God. This is what Christians believe has taken place in the person of Christ. Here the question about our ultimate origins is given a specifically Christian answer. We might conclude from such texts that the figure of Christ is not extrinsic to the universe. In fact, we might say that God’s creative action reaches a high point in the one whom Christians call the Christ.⁵

3.2.1 Survey Creation Accounts

Purpose:

To survey some New Testament creation accounts. This activity examines the broad biblical basis of MLO1.

Resource:


Task:

Read Hayes’s chapter, and ask yourself:

- What implications does the Christian view of creation (summarized by Hayes in his “Conclusion,” 39-40) have for my understanding of children and childhood?
- How could I communicate this view of creation to children in my care? And what implications does this understanding of creation have for the task of safeguarding children?


Journal

JOT A JOURNAL ENTRY:

- Explain, in a few sentences, the theological concepts or truths in this Module section that have caught your attention.
and given you new insight.

How do these insights challenge, confirm, or extend your previous understandings or assumptions?

If you took these new learnings on board, how would they change your self-understanding, your approach to life, or your educational practice?

3.3 Children in God's Creation

While the Genesis 1 account portrays humans as having a unique role in God’s creation (1:26-28), working with and caring for the entire creation as God does, nonetheless, the text emphasises the interrelationship of all living beings, and of humans as one creature among all of God’s creatures.

In reading the creation story from Genesis 1, we note two things. First, the opening verse communicates that everything began with God. Westermann points out that this does not mean the beginning of some particular thing or things, but rather “The Beginning”—all of reality comes to be in the love of God. Westermann puts it this way: “Reality exists only because God acts” (7-8). Second, the coming to life of living beings in three stages (plants, animals, human beings) envisages these beings and all creation as interrelated. Westermann says: “The author does not claim to show how [creation] happened. He was concerned to show that the present world, with its wealth of phenomena, is a single whole in the hands of its Creator, that the human race as living beings belongs to the totality of living beings, a creature among creatures.”

Toward the conclusion of his encyclical on the environment, Laudato Si’ (2015), Pope Francis reflects about the Trinity and the relationship between all creatures in God’s creation. He points out that as God is inherently relational—the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit (the divine Persons)—so are humans interrelated with all of God’s creatures, and that these relationships enable humans to mature. He speaks of the world as a “web of relationships.” These are Pope Francis’s words:

The divine Persons are subsistent relations, and the world, created according to the divine model, is a web of relationships. Creatures tend toward God, and in turn it is proper to every living being to tend towards other things, so that throughout the universe we can find any number of constant and secretly interwoven relationships. This leads us not only to marvel at the manifold connections existing among creatures, but also to discover a key to our own fulfilment. The human person grows more, matures more and is
sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from themselves to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures. In this way, they make their own that Trinitarian dynamism which God imprinted in them when they were created. Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity.²

3.3.1 Reflect on Educational Practice

Purpose:
To grasp, from both biblical and doctrinal perspectives, the interrelationship of humanity (especially children) and the whole created universe; and then to investigate the implications for professional educational practice. This activity develops the inter-relational dimension of creation, expressed in MLO1.

Resources:


Task:

Having read and reflected on Genesis 1, and reflected on *Laudato Si*, ask yourself:

- How could I communicate this understanding of the world as a web of relationships to the children in my care?
- What implications does this understanding have for my educational practice, and for my life?


Journal

JOT A JOURNAL ENTRY:

- Explain, in a few sentences, the theological concepts or truths in this Module section that have caught your attention and given you new insight.
- How do these insights challenge, confirm, or extend your previous understandings or assumptions?
- If you took these new learnings on board, how would they change your self-understanding, your approach to life, or your educational practice?

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