THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION AND THE ENLIGHTENMENT

Neil G. Robertson

And chiefly thou O Spirit, that dost prefer
Before all temples th’upright heart and pure,
Instruct me, for thou know’st; thou from the first
Wast present, and with mighty wings outspread
Dove-like sat’st brooding on the vast abyss
And mad’st it pregnant: what in me is dark
Illumine, what is low raise and support;
That to the height of this great argument
I may assert Eternal providence,
And justify the ways of God to men.
John Milton

Together let us beat this ample field,
Try what the open, what the covert yield;
The latent tracts, the giddy heights, explore
Of all who blindly creep, or sightless soar;
Eye nature’s walks, shoot Folly as it flies,
And catch the Manners living as they rise;
Laugh where we must, be candid where we can
But vindicate the ways of God to Man.

Alexander Pope

On the face of it, pursuing a connection between the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and the Doctrine of Creation appears a pretty sorry affair. The Enlightenment, especially in its most radical (French) forms, seemed inherently opposed to the very possibility of a doctrine of creation—or, at best, subscribed to the rather attenuated form of that doctrine that appears in deism. The developed articulations of the doctrine of creation given by ancient and medieval theologians and so wonderfully expounded by Robert Crouse in a variety of writings seems, in the Enlightenment, to be forgotten or altogether misunderstood. Indeed,

the very validity and utility of metaphysics, and above all theology, came to be questioned and even ridiculed in the Enlightenment by figures such as Voltaire, Diderot, Holbach and Hume. The effort to establish metaphysical proofs for the existence of God the creator that not only occupied medieval thought but also was central to the rationalists of the seventeenth century was seen by the Enlightenment to be a vain and fruitless effort. And while this latter claim received its most rigorous articulation towards the end of the age of Enlightenment in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, this critique was really the culmination of a century of attack on the folly of seeking to transcend finite knowledge in search of a developed knowledge of the creative source of the world.

The impetus behind this animus against theology and metaphysics lay not so much in the validity or invalidity of certain metaphysical claims; in fact both deists who claimed the rationality of the world evidenced a creative God, and atheists or agnostics who repudiated such a claim shared in an anti-metaphysical animus. Rather, for the central figures of the Enlightenment—both deist and atheist—the desire to forgo speculative metaphysics and traditional theology lay primarily in dissolving the relation and subordination of human purposes to divine purposes implicit in the older sciences of metaphysics and theology. That is, deeper than the cognitive claim that we cannot know the infinite in itself lay a practical impetus. In part this critique was motivated by a desire to overthrow the perceived superstitious, deceptive and manipulative character of religion and theology. But there is also a more deeply moral or ethical critique of religion and specifically of the Christian religion: namely, that given expression in (for example) Voltaire’s *Candide*—that a good, loving and omnipotent God could not be the creator of a world which displays such injustice, inhumanity and misery as ours. The point here is twofold: on the one hand, the evil and misery of the world are initially incompatible with a beneficent God; on the other, to “justify” the present evils while still attributing this world to a beneficent God is to inhibit and render passive the very human activity that might correct these evils. The further claim of the Enlightenment, then, is that not only is theodicy or the effort to justify the existence of God in the face