

Creatio ex nihilo as a Doctrine of the Limits

Philip Clayton

It's a strange situation to be arguing the pros and cons of *creation ex nihilo* with Catherine Keller and Monica A. Coleman. After all, I share so much in common with my friends across the metaphorical aisle represented by this panel. In one sense, if you think about it, nothing separates us. But what a nothing it is.

Think of the commonalities first. From the moment that you take God and world as given, our positions are deeply intertwined. Like many here in the "open and relational theologies" group, I owe an immense amount to the sparkling gifts of process thought. Through the deeply relational God of process theology I have come to understand more of the mysterious biblical God ... more of the history of philosophy ... more (as a comparative theologian) of other traditions, such Hindu thought.

There is another "tie that binds" us: we share many of the same criteria for what should be asserted about the divine — what should be said and what unsaid. For example, if affirming *creatio ex nihilo* should really turn out to be the innate cause of hierarchy — if *this* is what produces the subordination of women and of people of color, or if it really lies at the root of colonialism — then I would abandon it.

What then divides us? One answer would be that my colleagues across this aisle (across this nothing aisle that separates us) think that the question of ultimate origins can't be answered. Do *ex nihilo*-ists rush in where fools fear to tread? But this difference is again ... nothing. Process thinkers are as willing to speak of the primordial nature of God as ex-nihilogians are willing to speak of, say, the immanent Trinity. And *both* groups, when we are at our best, know how stand in Silence before the ultimate mystery. It's not true that one side loves questions while the other loves only answers, or that one knows where words fail us while the other is blind to the ultimate Apophatic. No, the mystery of our difference lies deeper.

The nothing that separates us has to do in the end, I think, with the symmetries. I mean of course the great propositions in *Process and Reality*, p. 348. You know: “It is as true to say that God is permanent and the World fluent, as that the World is permanent and God is fluent. It is as true to say that God is one and the World many, as that the World is one and God many. It is as true to say that, in comparison with the World, God is actual eminently, as that, in comparison with God, the World is actual eminently.” For Whitehead the symmetries are ultimate; they are the last word. I argue, by contrast, that they should not be the last word. And this difference is not nothing.

Let me try to evoke why we differ here.:

As humans we are drawn to immensities ... and to infinity. Think of three. The endless spaces of the galaxies fascinate and frighten us. The “otherness” of our most intimate others forms our lives; for, if Levinas is right, they remain infinitely Other even as they face us ... especially as they face us. And in the religious experiences of humanity, we plunge into a *mysterium* both *tremendum et fascinans*. Sometimes, it seems, we stand as it were face-to-face, vis-à-vis, with the Infinitely Other. The logic of Whitehead’s symmetries, Levinas would remind us, is the logic of sameness. (Strangely Hegelian.)

Is not the *deeper* mystery that from the infinitely Other stem these finite ones — us — we who, paradoxically, find ourselves always already in relation with this One? That we would know ourselves as finite in the face of infinity, contingent in the face of eternity, morally limited in the face of *bonum ipse*, Goodness itself?

Creatio ex nihilo expresses this infinite difference between God and creation. This non-symmetry isn’t just the starting point; it permeates our instant-by-instant relationship with that Presence in whom we live and move and have our being.

More: the non-symmetry of the *ex nihilo* helps to express that impossible possibility: that the finite and contingent would not only exist but also *participate in* its infinite source; *and* that we, with our tiny pains and passions, could actually affect the course of the evolving divine experience.

In short: let us immerse ourselves in the theology *ex profundis*, plunging into the chaos that is continually before us and within us. Let us speak of the God who holds back no part of Gods-self from relationship — the God who is, as Marjorie Suchocki beautifully puts it, “the Supremely Related One” (*God, Christ, Church*, 33) But let us *also* affirm the

asymmetries so that the differences, the grace, of this relationship also comes to light. We who might not have been are even today permanently affecting the divine experience.