

“Against Creation *Ex Nihilo*: a Whiteheadian, Feminist and Pluralist Perspective”

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Open and Relational Theologies Consultation

American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting, San Francisco, CA

November 20, 2011

As we look at the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, I want to be clear that I am examining this from three philosophical orientations. My first position is that of a process theologian who works out of a Whiteheadian metaphysics. The second position emerges from some feminist assertions about how we understand the divine in relation to the world. Third, I respond as someone not only committed to the work of religious pluralism and the fascinating interstitial places of transreligious spirituality and multiple religious belonging, but as someone whose primary non-Christian interest lies with African-derived religions.

I believe that Whitehead has a complicated relationship to Christianity, often saturated with a social Darwinism and Orientalist assumptions that make reading his less metaphysical texts difficult for those of us attuned to the deficiencies of modernism and white supremacy. Nevertheless, I believe Whitehead has a share of wisdom about some of the challenges of Christianity.

In Part 5 (chapter 2) of *Process and Reality*, Whitehead begins to describe what he understands as the problems of classical Christian theism. I'll highlight one here. He says: “The notion of God as the unmoved mover is derived from Aristotle, at least so far as Western thought is concerned. The notion of God as ‘eminently real’ is a favorite doctrine of Christian theology. The combination of the two into the doctrine of an aboriginal, eminently real, transcendent creator, at whose fiat the world came into being, and whose imposed will it obeys, is the fallacy which has infused tragedy into the histories of Christianity and of Mahometanism.”

The concern at this point is less with Aristotle and the way that God relates to the world – although I'll get to that in a moment – and more with the concept of God as transcendent, personal and possessing authoritative power.

Whitehead ties this notion of God to Western imperialism. “When the Western world accepted Christianity, Caesar conquered; and the received text of Western theology was edited by his lawyers.” This created what Whitehead calls “idolatry” – “the fashioning of God in the image of the Egyptian, Persian, and Roman imperial rulers ... The Church gave unto God the attributes which belonged exclusively to Caesar.”

This understanding of an imperial personal God has several negative consequences. I'm particularly interested in two of them. By assuming that divine power creates authoritatively, imperially, or to use Whitehead's words, by fiat, causes us to idolize that kind of power. To borrow from Mary Daly's phrasing about the maleness of God: if divine power is authoritative, then authoritative power is divine. We hereby give divine sanction to a power that rules, imposes and colonizes. The effects of this move within Christendom have been disastrous for the native peoples of the world.

Second – as Whitehead notes – this understanding of God loses what Christians can glean from the model of Jesus. An examination of the life of Jesus reveals another theistic philosophy. One, he says, that, “dwells upon the tender elements in the world, which slowly and in quietness operate by love; and finds purpose in the present immediacy of a kingdom not of this world. [A] Love [that] neither rules, nor is it unmoved; [love that] . . . finds its own reward in the immediate present.”

Whitehead not only calls us away from the idea of God as imperial ruler; Whitehead calls us away from the idea of God as personal being. Perhaps as Mary Daly asserts, God is not a being, and not the ground of being, but is *being*, the verb. Wendy Farley echoes this in her assertion of God – not as the one who loves – but as love itself. She describes this in ways that ring familiar to process thinkers: “Love is this emptying, connecting energy that in its power originates new connections and new life.” In other words, if God is seen as “creativity,” activity, verb, a gerund, we lose the need to imagine God as a “being” who creates out of nothing, and can re-imagine God as undergirding, connecting, loving – and there must be something with which these activities occur.

Finally, if we are able to imagine, to use Whitehead’s words again, a God who is “not *before* all creation, but *with* all creation,” we are better able to dialogue and connect with religious traditions that share that understanding of God. While Whitehead was convinced that traditions that I would refer to as “indigenous” are only local and exhibit less evolved forms of civilization, his concept of God is actually better able to find common truths with these traditions than the God of *creatio ex nihilo*.

I think of the many creation stories that begin with divinity, animals and earth. Orisha – perhaps more than one – are present in some realm – and they craft and shape humanity, or send a chicken that scratches out of earth, or sleep or argues among themselves. While stories like these describe divinity in incredibly personal terms, they also affirm an understanding that “in the beginning” is not God with a will and without a world, but God or Gods who works with the world. This core understanding of creation is co-creative, cooperative, morally neutral, possessing both humor and error. These same elements are seen throughout the – in my case – traditional Yoruba religious worldview and shape how individuals and communities conceive of the ideal life. In other words, their creation stories also create their world.

When Christians maintain a position of *creatio ex nihilo*, it becomes far too easy to think of a Christian creation narrative as possessing formative truth, while the creation narratives of others are myth, stories and projections – in the most negative and paternalistic use of these terms.

To summarize, I believe that *Creatio ex nihilo* reaffirms the tendency for (Christian) communities to organize around authoritative power, thus re-inscribing divine sanction of colonial activity. It also reaffirms God as a personal being, losing a feminist theological insight of God as a verb. *Creatio ex nihilo* effectively reduces conversation between Christianity and some non-Christian faith traditions around creation narratives and their mythic embodiment of core values and divine-world relations.