

Ex Nihilo, or Not?

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When on the relatively rare occasions I try to contemplate this question, I find myself hoping for some third alternative, some narrow ridge between *creatio ex nihilo* or *not*.

On the one hand, I sense that *ex nihilo* tends to give us a rather cheap universe, a kind of throwaway world that God could, in principle, blink away at any given moment, and then blink in a new one *ex nihilo* in the next, divine, moment. *Ex nihilo* can – I think it need not, but it can – seem too much like the rabbit pulled from the magician’s hat, though of course in this case the hat is nothing. It is *naught*, which may lead to the conclusion that, finally, creation is precisely all for naught. I certainly resist this conclusion.

On the other hand – well, what is that other hand? It seems as though it would have to be creation from *something* (if not nothing). And that, it seems to me, yields an odd rendering of what we mean when we say “God.” I don’t believe I am opposed to being persuaded otherwise, but the alternative to *ex nihilo* appears to me ultimately unacceptable because it must countenance some existent reality whose being is fundamentally independent of the Creator. Simply, my question is whether or not that leaves us with a problematic view of the God-world relation, especially in the light of the worship of God in synagogues, churches and mosques – and quite possibly in other houses of worship too.

I have at various times and in various ways attempted to give voice to some third way, some path between “not-this” and “not-that.” Creation from, say, *next-to* nothing? Is next-to-nothing enough? Or is it in fact too much? Does rejection of *ex nihilo* lead us necessarily to the

notion that there is some element in the world that is simply a ‘given’ for God, perhaps a few random (what we might now call) sub-atomic particles just swirling there on their own?

Something that, in order to create, the Creator had to start with, like baking a cake from scratch?

But can we say “God” and mean by that a creative power that does not and ultimately cannot account for everything else?

I certainly prefer to shift the discourse toward *creatio ex amore* – a phrase I believe I first encountered in the writing of Paul van Buren (though I cannot seem to locate it there any more!) – because it moves us from problematic notions of divine caprice, or sheer power, and moves us toward considerations of divine character as self-giving, other-receiving love. In that light it makes good sense to speculate with Origen that creative, fecund Love is everlastingly creating, so that whatever *ex nihilo* might entail, it need not entail some point of beginning for creation. It might also lead to the possibility of speculating that creation has been lovingly gifted with capacities for self-propagation and self-sustenance, such that, while it is indeed ultimately created *ex nihilo*, it truly exists with integrity as God’s “other” and so does not hang suspended, as though by the single thread of some cosmic spider’s web, over the abyss of nonbeing. That is to say, it is not one divine blink from returning to *nihilo*.

To conclude these brief remarks, I would like to submit that the writing of limericks is an under-appreciated art in contemporary theological discourse. Another of the panelists today, Richard Rice, and I have in the past enjoyed the practice of theological limericking, and seeing him again at the AAR this year has inspired me yet again to embrace this neglected art. (It didn’t hurt that he handed me a note yesterday with two freshly-minted limericks.) So as a lighthearted reminder to us all that, finally, all our theological speculations are probably more or less laughable:

Was there an initial foray
Into making the universe? – or a
World without start,
God's eternal art,
A creating best called *ex amore*?