

*Creatio Ex Nihilo: It's All About Nothing*  
**Open and Relational Theology Consultation**  
**American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting 2011**

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1. No issue highlights more vividly the differences between open theism and process thought, and the variations among open theists themselves, than the question of creation *ex nihilo* (CEN). In contrast to traditional theists, of course, process and open theists affirm a highly interactive view of God and world. God not only affects the world, the world has an effect on God, and God is sensitive to and deeply affected by all that happens within it.
2. In contrast to process theists, open theists maintain that God is ontologically distinct from the world. The world depends on God for its existence, but God does not depend on the world for God's. God's care for the world is therefore appropriately characterized as one of "kenotic love," a self-giving, self-sacrificing, freely-chosen love.
3. Open theists differ among themselves as to whether kenotic love for the world is a permanent feature of the divine experience. In other words, they disagree as to whether the world is coeternal with God, or whether it had a beginning. For some open theists, there has always been a world alongside God, not because God is ontologically dependent on the world, but because kenotic love is essential to the divine character, and kenotic love requires the permanent existence of a creaturely world as its object. As they see it, therefore, creation is the natural, and therefore necessary, expression of divine love.
4. My contention is that creation is the *natural, but not necessary, expression of divine love*. And I find the concept of CEN helpful in explaining this.
5. There are various accounts of the origin of the concept, CEN. (The work of Gerhard May is frequently cited.<sup>1</sup>) According to historian Robert Wilken, the second century physician Galen was the first critic of Christianity to see the implications of its view of God's relation to the world.<sup>2</sup> Like other Greeks, Galen believed that God created the world out of what already existed, like a potter fashions clay. (Plato's *Timaeus* was widely read at the time.) In contrast, Galen perceived, "The Mosaic view implies that the world was created out of what did *not* already exist.... [It] implies that matter came into existence only at the time of creation and did not exist prior to creation."<sup>3</sup> This is the idea the phrase creation *ex nihilo* came to express: the world's existence is due entirely to God's decision. God creates because God chooses to create, and God's relations to the world are based on freedom, not necessity.
6. While this formulation of the God-world relation did not emerge until relatively early in the common era, it nevertheless reflects the biblical descriptions of God's relation to the world. Even if we accept the view that Genesis 1 provides an account of functional rather than material origins,<sup>4</sup> the sovereign freedom with which God acts stands in striking contrast to other ANE creation narratives and leaves little doubt that the one who brings order to the *tehom*, the deep, is also the one responsible for its very existence.<sup>5, 6</sup>
7. A familiar line of argument in favor of CEN is that it preserves God's ontological self-sufficiency and unilateral power over the world. If God and world are coeternal, God and world are equally necessary, and God is not ultimate. As one supporter puts it, Biblical characterizations of God's freedom to act in and over against the world require an absolute quali-

tative distinction between creator and creation. And CEN preserves this by designating a creative act in the purest sense of the word: God brought it about that, when there was once nothing but God, there is now God and a world other than God.<sup>7</sup>

8. While power-based arguments for CEN have a certain value, they raise a number of questions,<sup>8</sup> and I believe we give the notion a firmer footing by appealing to divine love. It is precisely because God's preeminent characteristic is self-giving love that God brings into existence a reality other than Godself, a world totally dependent on God's free decision both to sustain *and* to initiate its existence. Viewed as an expression of divine love, CEN says something important about both creator and creation.

9. In line with Rahner's famous dictum regarding the economic and immanent trinity, CEN reminds us that God's relation to creation is consistent with, and revelatory of, what God has always been. It affirms the Christian vision of God as a complex reality, inherently and within itself social, relational, temporal and, yes, contingent.<sup>9</sup> On the one hand, this means that God does not need something other than God in order for God's loving nature to find fulfillment. Because God's own life exhibits all of these qualities, a creaturely world is not required to account for any of them.<sup>10</sup> God's creative activity does not fulfill some divine obligation, or meet some metaphysical or moral necessity on God's part.

10. On the other hand, creation is a perfectly natural expression of God's love. Since God's own reality is characterized by the affirmation of the other, we see in God's decision to create, and in God's care for and commitment to what God creates, a vivid reflection of the one whose nature is to embrace the other. So, the world exists as a perfectly natural extension of the love that characterizes the inner life of God as a loving society.

11. But even though God's decision to create is fully consistent with God's essential character, it was neither necessary nor inevitable. It was something God freely chose to do, something God might have chosen not to do, and this says something important about the world. It reminds us that the sheer existence of the world is due to divine grace. The world has no claim on God other than God's freely chosen commitment to it.

12. For process thinkers and for some open theists, divine love is inconceivable in the absence of a creaturely world, so unless the world exists necessarily, we cannot think of God as essentially loving. If there is a world only because God chose to create it (and God might not have chosen to do so), they argue, then God's love for the world does not express God's innermost, fundamental reality. It is merely incidental to God's nature.

13. To the contrary, I believe, the notion of a world whose very existence is contingent argues *for*, rather than against, divine love. Although creation is a choice, not a necessity, for God, this does not lessen the world's value. Instead, it shows how important the world is to God. After all, a freely chosen commitment can express one's deepest character every bit as much as one that is inevitable.<sup>11</sup> For many people, having children is a choice, not a necessity. But this hardly makes their children incidental to their identity.

14. Moreover, God's commitment to a world that owes its existence entirely to the fact that God freely chose to create it adds a new shade, or color, to the spectrum of God's love. The love that radiates within the trinity involves an affirmation of equals, the embrace of an other who fully deserves the affection it receives. In contrast, God's love for the creaturely world

involves affirming something that has value only because God has freely chosen to bring it into existence and embrace it within God's own life.

15. This does not mean that God's creative activity is purely arbitrary, nor that creation is merely incidental to God's life. Nor does it mean that the world lacks its own integrity, nor that the value of the world is negligible. To the contrary, far from diminishing the value of creation, the concept of CEN enhances it. There is nothing matter-of-fact about the world God created. The truth that its very existence is a matter of sheer grace makes it a cause for wonder and for thanks.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought*, trans. A. S. Worrall (T&T Clark, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (Yale, 1984), p. 89. According to Wilken, the first Christian thinker to develop the rudiments of a doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* was the Gnostic theologian Basilides. But it is not clear what, if any, influence his treatment of the topic had on subsequent Christian thinkers.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (IVP Academic, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> The majestic freedom characterizing God's creative activity in Genesis 1 stands in striking contrast to the pervasive picture that appears in other ANE creation accounts. There, *theomachy*, or divine conflict, is the predominant motif. "Particularly in the Babylonian creation epic, *Enuma Elish*, creation is accomplished in the aftermath of a battle for control of the pantheon and the cosmos" (Walton, 28-29).

<sup>6</sup> Philip Clayton notes that the notion of creation out of nothing whatsoever "more powerfully conveys the most radical contingency of created things" more effectively than the idea that God's creative activity presupposed a "chaos" or "ocean" which formed the "material" with which God worked, as described in Catherine Keller's creative reflections, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (Routledge, 2003) (*Adventures in the Spirit: God, World, Divine Action* [Fortress, 2008], 183).

<sup>7</sup> Colin Gunton, *The Triune Creator: A Historical and Systematic Study* (Eerdmans, 1998), p. 83.

<sup>8</sup> For some, the emphasis CEN places on divine supremacy conjures up the image of a God whose relation to creation is one of manipulation. God is an autocrat who achieves God's goals by keeping the creatures in their place and pushing them around. If God granted the creatures any real power, it would subtract from God's own power.

Further, some believe, CEN implies that God is arbitrarily creative. If God was ever without a world, God might always have been without a world. So the world's existence is purely incidental to the ultimate scheme of things. God is all that matters, and God would be just as wonderful, just as fulfilled, whether the world existed or not.

The idea of CEN, therefore, seems to deprive the world of meaning. If God's decision to create was purely arbitrary, then the value of the world is negligible. If God would be God whether a world existed or not, then the world contributes nothing of significance to God; it has no intrinsic value.

This is a caricature, of course. I don't think arguments for CEN that emphasize God's ontological uniqueness necessarily paint such a negative picture of God, or of the world. But even though I believe that Galen and his Christian contemporaries were correct in perceiving that the Christian concept of God's relation to the world that was quite different from the view that the world was coeternal with God, this caricature suggests that those of us who endorse CEN would do well to find another way to support it.

<sup>9</sup> The Trinitarian reflections of Joseph A. Bracken and Robert W. Jenson are particularly helpful on this point.

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the doctrine of the trinity arguably arose hand in hand with the conviction that the world is not eternal, that God does not need the world for God's existence, and therefore that God's creative activity is the free and natural expression of the person that God is and always has been.

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps even more so! As Philip Clayton suggests, citing David R. Larson, CEN expresses "the deeper insight into the nature of creaturely existence before God," viz., the "radical contingency" ... that characterizes the existence of our world as a whole," and of created things: "they exist out of no necessity of their nature, but only in and through their relationship with the final Ground" (Clayton, 183).

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Clayton, “The creation of both ourselves and the universe, being completely free and unconstrained, was a sign of God’s grace, that is, of God’s eternal character” (Ibid.).