

# From Nothing



From Nothing  
*A Theology of Creation*

IAN A. MCFARLAND

**WJK** WESTMINSTER  
JOHN KNOX PRESS  
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

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*First edition*

Published by Westminster John Knox Press  
Louisville, Kentucky

14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23—10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*Book design by Sharon Adams*

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#### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

TK

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

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*collegii regii*

*universitatis Aberdonensis*

*MCMXCVIII–MMV*

*cum gratia in memoria et remuneratione honoris et amicitiarum*



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## Preface

Most of my previous writing has focused on theological anthropology, or the Christian doctrine of human being. I was drawn to this topic by what seemed to me a persistent problem in the tradition: how to affirm the fundamental equality of all human beings under God (including the very practice of speaking of “humanity” as a single reality) while ascribing genuine theological significance to the differences that mark human beings as distinct individuals before God and one another. Over against approaches that either dismiss differences as irrelevant to our humanity or, worse, interpret them as indices of human inequality, I have argued that difference is central to human life before God, because God calls each human being to a different place within the body of Christ. Human beings are therefore equal in that they are all called by God to be persons in Christ (so that their equality is grounded extrinsically in God rather than in any intrinsic attribute or property they possess); but they differ in that they are called to enact that personhood in distinct and unsubstitutable ways. All are called to live under Christ, the one head, but no two occupy the same place in the body.

I continue to view this account of God’s relationship to humanity as fundamentally sound; yet in isolation from a broader theology of creation, it runs the risk of reducing Christ’s significance to purely human terms and thus of failing to take into account the cosmic scope of redemption. In Romans 8, for example, Paul certainly ascribes a distinctive role to human beings as those who have been called to be children of God (vv. 15–17; cf. John 1:11–13), but he also declares that the eschatological revelation of God’s (human) children will have redemptive significance for the whole (nonhuman) creation, which “will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (v. 21). An equally remarkable statement of the cosmic scope of God’s concern is found in the Psalms:

Your steadfast love, O LORD, extends to the heavens,  
 your faithfulness to the clouds.  
 Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,  
 your judgments are like the great deep;  
 you save humans and animals alike, O LORD.  
 (Ps. 36:5–6)

Here God's care encompasses the whole of the created order, with animals mentioned explicitly as the focus of God's saving activity alongside human beings. So elsewhere in Scripture the promise of "a new heaven and a new earth" (Rev. 21:1; cf. Isa. 65:17; 66:22; 2 Pet. 3:13), in which renewal extends to the nonhuman realm (Isa. 11:6; 65:25), warns against an anthropocentrism that restricts the scope of God's love—and the promise of heavenly glory—to humanity. Indeed, even from a purely anthropological perspective, the promise of bodily resurrection suggests some enduring relationship between human beings and the nonhuman creation, since it is precisely our bodies that link us human beings ontologically to the rest of the terrestrial creation—air, water, plants, and animals—from which we draw sustenance and apart from which we can neither flourish nor survive. The Lutheran theologian Joseph Sittler made this point eloquently:

Because men exist and are as relational entities, only a redemption *among* can be a real redemption. Only, that is to say, when the meaning and act of redemption is within the web of creation can a salvable identity be "saved" in any sense that makes sense. . . . In a bluntly human sense *my* redemption must include the possibility of redemption of everything.<sup>1</sup>

To be sure, the fate of the nonhuman creatures remains a marginal theme in the Bible. It is, after all, a book addressed to human beings and, as such, maintains a natural focus on human affairs and humanity's own peculiar predicaments. When sustained attention is given to the nonhuman realm, the overall effect is to suggest humanity's incapacity to do much more than gesture toward its mysterious character. For example, in speaking to Job out of the whirlwind, God stresses the deep incomprehensibility of the ways of other animals; and Scripture is still more reticent when it comes to spiritual beings, whose role in creation is even less subject to human reckoning. These features of the biblical witness suggest that to a very large extent the nature and destiny of the nonhuman creation is simply none of our business. And yet not entirely, for it is the task of human beings not only to care for the land in which God has placed them (Gen. 2:15; cf. Deut. 26:1–11), but also to exercise dominion over the whole of the animal kingdom (Gen. 1:26, 28; Ps. 8:6–8)—even if human beings' evident

1. Joseph Sittler, *Evocations of Grace: The Writings of Joseph Sittler on Ecology, Theology, and Ethics*, ed. Steven Bouma-Prediger and Peter Bakken (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 178–79. Cf. Allan D. Galloway, *The Cosmic Christ* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 205.

confusion and incapacity in the face of the bewildering complexity of the created order casts doubt on their ability to fulfill that mandate. Here, too, humanity's destiny seems bound up in some way with that of all other creatures—heavenly and earthly, living and nonliving, vegetable and animal—that together with humanity constitute a whole that God judges “very good” (Gen. 1:31).

In what follows I address the issue of the connection of the human and the nonhuman by arguing that the emphasis on God's action that I have used as the theological basis for affirming human equality-in-difference can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to creation as a whole. In making this argument, I do not seek to show that all creatures are equal in the same way that all human beings are. Even apart from passages like 1 Corinthians 9:9,<sup>2</sup> Scripture's talk of human dominion over other animals and of humanity's seemingly unique call to the status of God's children raises difficult questions for a strong assertion of creaturely equality across species (though possibly no more difficult than those raised for the idea of human equality by passages like 1 Corinthians 11:3–7 and 1 Timothy 2:11–15). I will, however, want to insist quite pedantically on the point that there is one, absolutely fundamental respect in which all creatures are equal: in the fact that they are *created*. Within traditional Christian discourse this claim is significant because to be created is to have been brought into being by God “from nothing” (*ex nihilo* in Latin), and therefore to be absolutely distinct from God, who is uncreated. This means that the creation is not properly conceived as a great chain of being, in which angels, humans, animals, plants, minerals, and so forth constitute a scale in which the former members are ontologically closer to God and the latter farther removed. On the contrary, the classical Christian doctrine of creation suggests that the most theologically significant thing that can be said about any creature is simply that it is not God and, as such, no closer to or farther from God than any other creature. Since all creatures have God as their sole source and condition of existence, all of them—from the angel in heaven to the slime at the bottom of the septic tank—are equally near to (or far from) God. It follows that a crucial measure of our commitment to love God as Creator of all things is our willingness to honor God's commitment to the flourishing of all creatures by “our readiness . . . to challenge and resist the making or remaking of exclusions or inequalities in creation.”<sup>3</sup>

This fundamental equality of all creatures, as derived from the doctrine of creation from nothing, is the ground for what will emerge as one of this book's themes: that Christian teaching about creation is more idiosyncratic than is generally recognized. It is not my experience (at least within my own North Atlantic context) that people—whether or not they identify themselves as Christian—think that the doctrine of creation from nothing is especially striking or odd in its implications for how we view the world. On the contrary, in the realms of apologetics and interreligious dialogue alike, the doctrine of creation is often

2. “For it is written in the law of Moses, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.’ Is it for oxen that God is concerned?”

3. Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 76.

treated as something of a “forecourt of the Gentiles,” a means by which Christians can find common theological ground with non-Christians at a generous remove from the more knotty questions associated with topics like atonement, original sin, or the Trinity. Even among Christianity’s atheist critics, the doctrine of creation tends not to be regarded as unusual. It may be rejected as irrational or incredible, but it tends to be viewed as very much part of the standard furniture of “religious” discourse—not least, I suspect, because Christians, too, often treat it that way.

Religious traditions the world over and extending as far back in time as written records extend have “creation stories,” accounts of how the present world order came to be. Their content is quite varied. In some cases the central theme is violence, in which the world and its denizens are manufactured by the gods from the corpse of some primeval monster (e.g., the Babylonian epic *Enuma Elish*, which may also lie behind the Greek myth of humanity made from the remains of the Titans). In others, the stories have a more naturalistic cast, in which the world is birthed from a cosmic egg (e.g., certain Hindu and Taoist traditions, the Finnish *Kalevala*), or is understood as an emanation from the divine (Plotinus’s *Enneads*, Jewish kabbalistic thought). Notwithstanding these significant differences, however, all these cosmogonies share the presupposition of a fundamental ontological continuity between Creator and creature: the world and its inhabitants derive from divinity in such a way that the visible cosmos includes traces of divinity, however obscure or deformed these may be.<sup>4</sup>

The Christian Bible, arising as it did in the midst of a religiously diverse region over a long period of time, retains something of this range of imagery. The Old Testament contains a number of references to Israel’s God as the one who defeated the ancient sea serpent, much as the Babylonian god Marduk slew the dragon Tiamat (Job 26:12; Ps. 89:10; Isa. 51:9). Less explicitly but no less significantly, the image of the wind or spirit of God moving over the primordial waters may echo the imagery of the mother bird brooding over its eggs (Gen. 1:2; cf. Deut. 32:11–12; Matt. 23:37 and par.; cf. *4 Ezra* = 2 Esd. 1:30). And descriptions of God’s own Spirit as the source of created life (Gen. 2:7; Ps. 104:30) are at least suggestive of emanationist ontologies in which the visible world is in some sense continuous with the divine. Nevertheless, with extraordinary rapidity the early church rejected the claim that such language had anything other than purely metaphorical significance, insisting instead on

4. What Kathryn Tanner says of Greek and Roman religion can to this extent be applied more generally: “Divinity refers to a kind of being distinct from others within the matrix of the same cosmos. . . . As a distinct sort of being differentiated from others, like any other kind, within the same spectrum of being making up the cosmos, divinity is a predicate determined by commonality and susceptible of difference: it is the sort of thing which can be said to be shared generically with specifying differences of degree.” Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 39.

the radical ontological discontinuity between Creator and creature encapsulated in the doctrine of creation from nothing.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, Christianity is not the only tradition to affirm creation from nothing, which is also upheld by Jews and Muslims. While creation from nothing seems to have been less settled in Judaism in particular than it was in Christianity prior to the modern period, the doctrine remains a significant point of agreement among the three Abrahamic faiths—to the extent that it was singled out by the great medieval Jewish thinker Moses Maimonides as the only doctrine the three held in common.<sup>6</sup> And although each tradition followed its own distinctive path in arriving at the doctrine, there was in the medieval period significant cross-fertilization among Jewish, Christian, and Muslim thinkers on the metaphysics of creation and its implications for human freedom in particular.<sup>7</sup> Be that as it may, I argue that the church's doctrine of creation from nothing is best understood in the context of the specifically Christian doctrine of the Trinity and, still more specifically, as a corollary of the belief that Christ is the one in whom all things were created (Col. 1:16) and apart from whom nothing was made that was made (John 1:3).

The argument I make in support of this position begins in chapter 1 with a basic orientation to the Christian doctrine of creation from nothing. This survey includes reflection on the lack of explicit biblical support for this teaching, its emergence in the latter half of the second century CE, and contemporary challenges to its coherence. The rest of the book is divided into two parts that together constitute a more detailed exposition of the doctrine. Part I focuses on the claim that the world originates in God, undertaken through a sequential exegesis of the statement “God creates from nothing,” over the course of three chapters that explore, respectively, the meaning of “God,” “creates,” and “from nothing.” Part II explores the ways in which God is also the world's goal and end through an examination of evil (that which runs counter to God's will for the world), providence (God's interaction with creation), and glory (the consummation of God's creative work). Because the conceptual territory covered by these two parts corresponds more or less to the Christian vision of the world as both emerging from and moving toward God, I have given the two parts the classic Latin superscriptions *exitus* (outflow) and *reditus* (return). In line with this distinction, part I focuses on creation's rootedness in God's life, while part

5. Although Thomas Aquinas characterizes creation as emanation in *Summa theologiae* 1.45, he uses the word as a neutral term for “emergence,” and not to describe an automatic process whereby God produces a world that is in any way ontologically continuous with the divine.

6. For Maimonides, see Janet M. Soskice, “*Creatio ex Nihilo*: Its Jewish and Christian foundations,” in *Creation and the God of Abraham*, ed. David B. Burrell et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 24. For the debates within Judaism on the “ex nihilo,” see Seymour Feldman, “In the Beginning God Created: A Philosophical Midrash,” in *God and Creation: An Ecumenical Symposium*, ed. David B. Burrell and Bernard McGinn (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 3–26; and more extensively, Norbert M. Samuelson, *Judaism and the Doctrine of Creation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

7. See David B. Burrell's two books, *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) and *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

II regards creation from the perspective of its existence over against God. The Trinitarian and christological dimensions of the doctrine are, correspondingly, more evident in the first part of the book. They are less prominent in the second half, not because God's creative work becomes any less triune when considered in light of creation's "return" to God, but rather because the classical principle that the external works of the Trinity are undivided (*opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*) means that the distinct roles of the divine persons in preserving, empowering, and directing creation to its divinely intended end are not immediately open to creaturely perception.

This thematic shift from creation's rootedness *in* God to the contours of its existence *under* God is further reflected in the way that the chapters that make up part II take up in inverse order the topics introduced in part I. Thus the reality of evil examined in chapter 5 is a paradox inseparable from the analysis of the phrase "from nothing" in chapter 4; likewise chapter 6's discussion of providence takes up the implications of divine "creating" as laid out in chapter 3; and the reflections on glory in chapter 7 bring the discussion back to the character of the Creator, which is the subject of chapter 2. This chiasmic structure should not, however, be understood as charting a historical narrative, as though the chapters of part I cast the world's emergence from God as a sequential process, and those of part II a parallel (if inverse) process of return. Even the shift from providence to glory in the book's final two chapters does not correspond in a straightforward way to a movement in time from present to future, and the succession of topics in the earlier chapters is even less a matter of temporal sequence. For while it is true, according to the doctrine of creation from nothing, that evil is logically subsequent to creation even as God is logically prior to creation, the movement from God to creation to the topics of nothing and evil in chapters 2 through 5 is better understood as the successive examination of a single idea from different perspectives—the exploration of various facets or aspects of the Christian belief in creation as a reality that is distinct-from-yet-originating-in God—than as a historical narrative of how the world came to assume its current form.

This nontemporal structure points to a fundamental theological presupposition that shapes my analysis of creation. Although it is true that throughout the history of the church the overwhelming majority of Christians have understood "creation" as referring to a historical event (equivalent to what contemporary cosmologists identify as  $t = 0$ ), and that most current discussion of "creation" in the public sphere turns on the dating of this putative event, it seems to me that the Christian doctrine of creation is only marginally concerned with the question of the world's temporal origin. Far more fundamentally, the doctrine of creation from nothing is a proposal about the character of God's relationship to the world. As David Kelsey observed more than thirty years ago, the doctrinal claim that the world had a temporal beginning is at bottom a question about biblical interpretation that, while certainly significant in its own right, has no bearing on the issues of God's transcendence, immanence, and sovereignty that

lie at the heart of the doctrine of creation from nothing.<sup>8</sup> To put it in a nutshell, it is my contention that while the Christian confession of the lordship of Christ is inseparable from the doctrine of creation from nothing, it is completely unaffected by the scientific question of whether or not (let alone when) the world had a temporal beginning.<sup>9</sup> I will thus have very little to say about the question of beginnings, not because I find it uninteresting, but because I do not believe that it is of decisive significance for the Christian belief that God created the world from nothing.

A second way in which theologies of creation sometimes intersect with contemporary scientific discourse has to do with ecological questions. Here there is more overlap with this project, which shares with contemporary ecological theologies the concern that Christian reflection on creation has been so overwhelmingly anthropocentric in character that it has failed to take seriously God's love for and commitment to the well-being of all creatures, with disastrous consequences for the natural environment. In contrast to many others motivated by this concern, however, in what follows I do not offer a theology of nature and, in fact, do not make much use of the term "nature" in my analysis. This decision

8. Kelsey reports that in the medieval period "the claim about an absolute origination of the world was included in the doctrine of creation . . . solely on the grounds that . . . it is taught by Scripture. Debates about the validity of the contrary view, that the world is eternal, were conducted as philosophical arguments. Nobody argued that any other part of the doctrine, or any other Christian doctrine, would be undercut were Aristotle's view [that the world is eternal] to be validated." David H. Kelsey, "The Doctrine of Creation from Nothing," in *Evolution and Creation*, ed. Ernan McMullin (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985), 184. For a still more fulsome evaluation of the question of the logical relationship between belief in creation from nothing and belief in  $t = 0$ , see Donald D. Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement: A Philosophical Study of Everyday Language with Special Reference to the Christian Use of Language about God as Creator* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 242–49.

9. Those who affirm the doctrinal importance of  $t = 0$  tend to do so on the grounds that the admission of any error in the Bible undermines its authority (i.e., if Scripture cannot be relied upon in matters of cosmology, neither can its claims about Jesus be trusted). Leaving aside the (to me very doubtful) exegetical claim that the opening chapters of Genesis are properly understood as history along the lines of the books of Samuel, Thucydides, or Macaulay, the claim that the trustworthiness of the gospel is predicated on biblical inerrancy only follows if one confuses Scripture with God. Scripture itself is the best antidote to such bibliolatry, since though it has to do with nothing less than the "gospel of God" (Rom. 1:1), it gives us that "treasure in earthen vessels" (2 Cor. 4:7 KJV), so that we find in it no "Gospel according to God," but rather the Gospel according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John; no "Prophecy of God," but of Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah; no "Acts of God," but the Acts of the Apostles; no "Letters of God," but those of Paul and Peter and James and Jude. That such writers, though "inspired by God," might have made some incorrect statements with respect to matters of history, astronomy, mathematics, and the like should no more undermine confidence that their works are "useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16) than my surgeon's ascribing a painting of Raphael's to Da Vinci or claiming that the sun's surface temperature is 50,000 degrees Celsius makes me doubt her competence to remove my appendix. The idea that biblical authority is (as the authors of "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy" argue) an all-or-nothing affair suggests a kind of epistemological neurosis far more indebted to Descartes than to the classical Christian tradition. My reliance on a gas station attendant to help me find an address in a strange town is not predicated on any sort of global confidence in his knowledge, but on the assumption that a resident will be a reliable guide to the local geography. Similarly, when I rely on Paul's Letters for my doctrine of justification, it is not because I view them as incapable of containing errors of any sort, but because in this matter their status as Scripture gives them authority.



is based on two considerations. First, in colloquial English “nature” is often defined by contrast with “culture” in a way that tends to reenforce the anthropocentrism that I want to resist (as though “nature” referred to the nonhuman creation only, rather than encompassing all creatures, including human beings). Second, within the history of theology “nature” has sometimes been used to refer to the existence and operations of creatures in abstraction from God’s grace (most notoriously, in the late Scholastic category of *natura pura*). Since it is a central feature of my argument that the created order is at every point sustained and empowered in its existence entirely and exclusively by God’s grace, I try to avoid speaking of “nature” in order to forestall the inference that creation enjoys any degree of ontological autonomy vis-à-vis God.

A further, final caution has to do with clarifying the scope of a Christian doctrine of creation. The sheer range of material associated with the topic may, perhaps unavoidably, suggest to the reader that I am presenting a (or worse, *the*) “Christian worldview.” This is emphatically not my intention. On the contrary, I operate under the presupposition that there is no such thing as a “Christian worldview,” if by that is meant a particular way that all Christians, by virtue of their commitment to the gospel of Jesus Christ, understand the basic structure of the cosmos, history, and society. Even a cursory glance at the Christian tradition demonstrates that Christians have found it possible to preach the gospel while holding a wide array of worldviews, and moreover, that explicitly tying Christianity to a particular worldview (whether Aristotelian metaphysics and cosmology, or Romantic notions of cultural evolution and social progress) has often proved more a hindrance than a help in preserving the integrity of that confession over time. The point of the present volume is therefore not to generate a cosmological picture that Christians are supposed to keep in their heads as a framework within which to interpret reality. Part of the force of the argument will, indeed, be that any such comprehensive picture of things is likely to prove inadequate to the full range of Christian convictions about God’s relationship to the world. Instead, the exposition of the belief in creation from nothing offered here serves the more modest function of suggesting some of the parameters governing the confession that Christians are called to make, whatever worldview may be in vogue at the time.



As is true of any book, this one has been shaped by conversation as much as research, and I am correspondingly grateful to the many people who have helped shape my thought. My approach to the subject finds its deepest roots in talks about creation with my former teachers, David Kelsey and Kathryn Tanner, and my former colleague, David Fergusson. More recently, Don McKim’s invitation to produce the reader *Creation and Humanity* for Westminster John Knox’s Sources of Christian Theology series provided the impetus for my undertaking this project, and I am grateful to him, David Dobson, and (especially) Bob



Ratcliff and Daniel Braden, who shepherded this manuscript through various stages of the publication process, for their support.

My colleagues in the Theological Studies program of Emory University's Graduate Division of Religion provided helpful feedback on several chapters. Mention must also be made of the members of my spring 2012 seminar, "Encountering God: Case Studies in the Material Mediation of Grace," who read an early draft of this text. I am thankful both for the grace with which they responded to the awkward task of being asked to comment on a professor's manuscript, and for their thoughtful comments on the substance of my argument. Finally, I owe a special debt of gratitude to my research assistant, Amaryah Armstrong, who undertook the supremely boring task of checking the footnotes, and to S. David Garber at Westminster John Knox for an extraordinarily meticulous job of copyediting. However many things may justly be said against what I have written here, their number would be far greater but for these contributions.