

Creation out of Nothing

by Robert Bolton

An Apparent Contradiction

Some realities become invisible as a result of being seen too often, and an example of this can be seen in the fact that Christian tradition has consistently employed the philosophies of Plato or Aristotle, or both, almost from the earliest times, while at the same time it has always taught that God made the world “out of nothing” (*ex nihilo*), by a free creative act. What is strange about these facts is the combination they make. On the face of it, there is a clear contradiction between the *ex nihilo* conception of creation and both the Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies. Those philosophies are in no way consistent with this because they are concerned with the question as to what constitutes the true nature of manifest beings. They both find the answer in terms of a union of eternal Forms with an equally eternal matter. Such is the hylomorphic idea of the world which is common to most traditions.

The first implication of this conception is that the world is definitely made from something real, not from nothing. In the case of Aristotle’s philosophy, this implication follows even more decisively than from Plato’s, because for Aristotle the Forms are not separable from matter, having no independent subsistence of their own. Even though beings in this world are impermanent, therefore, there could be no doubt about the permanent reality of the things from which they were made. Such is the ontological conception which Christian thought has always accepted, while also teaching that the world was made out of nothing. If in fact this can be shown to be not really a contradiction, it may be because the “out of nothing” idea is never explained, but is presented as though

it could have only one meaning. This is why it is necessary to reach a deeper understanding of the *ex nihilo* than the one which common sense usually makes of it.

Reasons for the *Ex Nihilo*

If there is something dubious about the *ex nihilo* idea, there is nothing dubious about the doctrinal position which was thought to make this idea necessary, since it concerns the omnipotence and infinity which must by definition enter into our conception – of God. The questions, then, are whether this doctrine needs support from a creation out of nothing, or whether the latter follows logically from it.

According to one of the arguments used by Aquinas¹, if there must always be something prior to any creative act of God, creation would be blocked by an infinite regress, because as soon as one precondition was provided, another one would be required; if creation could ever proceed without further obstruction, the main premise would be denied. But this would only be true if the precondition was necessary *a priori*, but not if it was only accidental or *de facto*.

A sounder argument is that the higher the rank of the cause, the greater the number of things it must give rise to. From thence it follows that the highest cause of all must be the cause of absolutely everything. That would rule out any pre-existent matter, if it had to exist independently of God, even though matter is in itself a universally necessary condition for the act creation. Furthermore, only an infinite power could start from nothing but itself; otherwise a very great finite power might suffice, given a pre-existing material. This is why the production of a complete substance, with nothing presupposed, forms Aquinas' definition of creation, as opposed to any natural mode of production. But the question remains, whether this is the same as what is usually understood by the *creatio ex nihilo*. In support of this conception, Aquinas quotes *Genesis Ch.1 v.1* "In the beginning God created heaven and earth"², although its meaning can simply be that of God's self-sufficiency

¹ For Aquinas' arguments, see *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Bk.II, Ch.16.

² Modern translations are almost unanimous in rendering it "the heavens and the earth," as though it referred to nothing more than this planet and the starry sky, but the Septuagint uses the singular *ton ouranon*, and the Vulgate uses the singular *caelum*. The King James Bible translates it in the singular.

in the act of creation, and not a judgement on the means of creation. In the account of creation from verse 2 onwards, the text relates its later stages in relation to already-existent things, which pre-exist the world, though not God. If only verse 1 speaks of creation in an absolute sense, it would mean that what the primal realities consisted of were the formative principles or prototypes of creation and the prime matter. In this case the meaning of “heaven and earth” in this first verse would be that of metaphysical principles, having the same function as the “Heaven and Earth” of Far-Eastern tradition. These, then, would be the primal pair which was created without any means, and in fact Jewish tradition teaches that God first creates in this way a subtle matter (*Tobu*) as the world’s foundation stone, which is capable of receiving the action of the Forms (*Bobu*)³. The world consequent upon this would therefore be made in the manner as conceived by Plato and Aristotle, and not requiring any thing – equally co-eternal with God. Heaven and Earth, in the Oriental sense of the word constitute the first intelligible reality after the Supreme, which transcends all intelligible Forms. They comprise the universal polarity between “active perfection” and “passive perfection,” that is, the ultimate self-identical and receptive principles. In Neoplatonism, this pair is known as the Bound and Infinity, and here too they are the means by which all beings are created. Their relationship is also the archetype of all dualities, ranging from Form and Instantiation to Subject and Object. They were necessarily there “in the beginning.”

Orders of Creation

Implicit in this traditional hylomorphic idea of the world is a rational mode of creation, one which realizes all levels of possibility from the highest down to the lowest, with a delegation of God’s creative power through those levels. This conception has had a place in Christian tradition since Dionysus the Areopagite, whose conception of the various levels of being nevertheless never excluded the possibility of a direct relation between each created being and the Creator. This also assumes that the laws of causality are not simply a part of creation, but also enter into its formation. The proto-creation of Forms and angels would

³ Angelo S. Rappoport, *Myths and Legends of Ancient Israel*, (NY, Ktav Publishing, 1966) ch. 1.

then arise according to the Proclean principle that causes always give rise first to effects most like themselves, and the least like, last of all. For example, fire produces successively lesser degrees of heat, according to one's distance from it, and an object is seen with as much clarity of detail as possible near-to, and decreasingly so with greater distances. Such is the normal Platonic conception as to how the different kinds of being are so related as to make up a coherent world. This is a form of emanationism, but with the essential difference that it does not mean any substantive diffusion of, or subtraction from God, as would be the case with the typical forms of this idea. What makes the difference here is called the principle of "undiminished giving" by Paul Henry, who identifies it as the corner-stone of this system and, in a way "the counterpart of the doctrine of emanation."⁴

Thus God or the One is conceived as multiplied externally in the beings which emerge first in order, instead of being divided among them, as normal emanation teaches. Where the same kind of production takes place at lower levels of being, it appears in the way in which Forms remain unaffected by the numbers of instances they may or may not give rise to. The way in which the Sun and the stars pour out light and heat, seemingly inexhaustibly, is a traditional natural image of this kind of relation:

"for the Principle is not broken up into parts to make the total; on the contrary, such partition would destroy both; nothing would come into being if its cause, thus broken up, changed its character."⁵

The productive Source can only produce as long as it remains unchanged as it is, whence substantial self-partition would put an end to the productive power. But the principle of "undiminished giving" applies only to the exemption of the Source in relation to its finite productions, but does not imply that the higher principle is under any necessity to give rise to the lower. The idea that it is under some such necessity by virtue of its essential nature, like the necessity for Good to cause good, follows from the Principle of Plenitude:

⁴ *Enneads* of Plotinus (A.D. c. 203-262) translated by Stephen MacKenna, Fourth Revised Edition (London, Faber, 1969), edited by B.S. Page, with a Foreword by Professor E.R. Dodds and an Introduction by Professor Paul Henry.

⁵ *Enneads* (*ibid.*), Book III, 8, 10.

“[N]one of the real beings (of the intellectual cosmos) would exist if that unity remained at a halt within itself: the plurality of these beings, offspring of the unity, could not exist without their own nexs taking the outward path; these are the beings holding the rank of souls. . . . To this power we cannot impute any halt. . . .”⁶

According to the concept of emanation, each order of being has the power of bringing into existence the next below itself, as it is the means by which the primal action of the Godhead is propagated. Plotinus also invokes the idea that like must produce like, so that if immortal souls are produced, the source of their being must *ipso facto* be immortal as well, and therefore remain unchanged by their production, in its intact identity, as Plotinus calls it.

In this way, it can be seen that the Platonic equivalent of the emanationist idea of a world being “made from God” is dissociated from its pantheistic and materialistic forms as completely as possible. In this form it requires no compromises with non-theistic ideas, and presupposes only God with no pre-existent matter, as in the Christian doctrine also. Nevertheless, Plotinus and all the other Neoplatonists never think that this means that they need to speak in terms of creation out of nothing. It is as though the idea was not necessary, and the reason for this needs to be understood, because this divergence is usually taken to mean a conflict with Christian tradition. This difference may well turn out to be only a matter of terminology and of perspective, if in fact the *ex nihilo* is just a tautology and not a conclusion of substance. In this case, to say “God creates X *out of nothing*” and to say “God creates X *out of Himself*” would in fact amount to the same thing, however different they sound. If there is nothing besides God in the act of creation, God must be its only basis as It exists, and the “from nothing” would simply be a way of underlining the definition. In other words, “the nothing” clause would have the same function as in statements like: “This is my own work, and nothing else.” In either case, it puts a firm definition on the first half of the statement, without adding to its content. Where this is ignored, strange confusions arise, which will be considered later.

In any case, the conception of creation in relation to “nothing” in any sense of the word does not predominate in all representatives of Chris-

⁶ *Enneads (ibid.)*, Book IV, 8, 6.

tian tradition. For example, the *ex nihilo* is not used by Scotus Eriugena, for whom creative action is as inseparable from God as Being itself, so that God's creation of all things means His indwelling in all things. His thought comprises the idea that God is the creator of the Forms, and that they are the means by which the phenomenal world is created. Unfortunately for his influence on theology, though, he does not sufficiently clarify the distinction between God and the world, and this is accompanied by the further difference that the Forms are not clearly separated from God either. Whether they are shown to be independently subsistent realities or not in Eriugena's writings is not always clear, and it is true that a loss of the distinction between God and the world would follow logically from a denial of the distinction between God and the Forms, since they would not then be the created means for the production of the phenomenal world. (The ontological gap between God and the Forms is of the same order as that between the Forms and the world). Without the above distinctions, the world would be created out of God in the pantheistic sense, since there would be no noetic world to transmit God's creative action, and be the locus of it. Such a conflation of God with the Forms would naturally imply a similar conflation of God and the world. Unlike Eriugena, those who wanted to retain the first of these conclusions wanted to exclude the second, regardless of consistency, and this is where the *ex nihilo* is brought in to create a barrier between God and the world which the above conceptions alone would not yield by themselves.

Eriugena's lack of concern with creation out of nothing was owing to the fact that he was writing in a tradition in which the problems of creation and emanation had been solved, even though too few understood the solution for it to have much effect outside esoteric philosophy. For exoteric religion, this idea is difficult to separate from Pantheism, and Christian thought does not make any formal distinction between the esoteric and the exoteric, and so gives no special status to concepts which are not clearly part of revelation. Under these conditions, the *ex nihilo*



God Creating the Universe
("The Ancient of Days" by
William Blake).

can be mistaken for a higher wisdom which was somehow in conflict with the intelligible world-order disclosed by normal intellectual processes. This makes the truths of revelation and intellect appear to be in conflict, with the realm of the intelligible bounded by an accidental limit.

The Esoteric *Ex Nihilo*

The problem here can be attributed to the fact that theology is based on revelation, whereas Platonism is only supernatural to the extent that the intellect shares this property. But in this case one would expect to find the idea of creation out of nothing to be stated explicitly in the Bible, whereas in fact this does not appear to be the case. Even the first verse of Genesis could be consistent with God's acting on an unformed pre-existent matter, which is not referred to. This would invite comparison with the verse in *The Wisdom of Solomon*, which refers to "thy all-powerful hand, which created the world out of formless matter" (*Wisdom*, ch.II, v.17), though the beginning of matter is not mentioned here either. More surprisingly still, creation out of nothing is not mentioned in *The Book of Job*, where there are abundant texts in chapters 38 and 39 which speak at some length of all the different works done by God. This is similar to the *Psalms*, where creation is spoken of.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the *ex nihilo* principle is not to be found in Judaism, but only that it did not first of all appear in an exoteric form tied to literal readings. Since it can be shown to be present in Jewish doctrine, this is no doubt where Christians learned of it in the first place, though it was only adopted after a radical change was made to its meaning.

According to Gershom Scholem, the nothingness (*ayin* or *afisab*) is conceived in the first place subjectively, as "the barrier confronting the human intellectual faculty when it reaches the limit of its capacity."⁷ The divine reality at the head of creation, beyond the scope of created intellects, is necessarily therefore a "nothingness," not in itself, but for human minds.

The first manifestation of the *Ein-Soph* is therefore "nothing" on this basis, even though the later stages of creation are not, because, being

⁷ Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (NY, Dorset, 1987) from Ch.3.

more limited, they are correspondingly more conceivable, and if in this case the latter are said to proceed “out of nothing,” this is anything but an objective nothingness. However, this conception did not remain confined to the esoteric, but emerged later as a formula for exoteric belief, both in Judaism and in Christianity. Scholem speaks of this obscure development as follows:

“This daring symbolism is associated with most mystical theories concerning an understanding of the Divine, and its particular importance is seen in the radical transformation of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* into a mystical theory stating the precise opposite of what appears to be the literal meaning of the phrase.” (my italics)⁸.

This means that the exoteric acceptance of the *ex nihilo* owes its peculiar character to its being a reversal of the esoteric meaning of the formula, the existence of which is usually ignored today. The conception it is really evolved from is stated clearly by 13th Century Kabbalist, David b. Abraham ha-Lavan, who defined the *ayin* (“nothingness”) as:

“having more being than any other being in the world, but since it is simple, and all other simple things are complex when compared with its simplicity, so in comparison it is called ‘nothing’.”⁹

The main implication of this is that this doctrine means a “creation from within God Himself.” Such is the highly improbable source of the idea of a “real nothing” in creation which affects theological thought up to the present day. The question as to whether it is something objective or subjective is hardly ever raised. Instead, it is used as though its meaning were self-evident, in the name of fidelity to revelation, although its place in revelation appears unverifiable. An example of this usage is given by Frank Sheed¹⁰, a Catholic theologian, who bears witness to the way in which the idea of creation out of nothing causes a state of alarm at the instability and transience of natural life, and which leads in turn to a deeper and more conscious dependence on God. Nevertheless, the same result follows from the simpler idea that God alone causes us to exist. Sheed also makes an important point¹¹ about nothingness where he says that it can exert a fascination on human minds equal and opposite to that of God, but here one is crossing the line into psychology.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ quoted by Gershom Scholem, *ibid.*

¹⁰ See *God and the Human Condition*, p. 7, by Frank Sheed

¹¹ *ibid.* p. 142

Strangely enough, the treatment of nothing as a quasi-objective reality coincides in an accidental way with the *hyle* of the Platonists, but despite that, it is theoretically ineffectual because it is not linked to any other equally primal reality, as *hyle* is with the Forms, but only with God Himself. This reciprocal relation to God would in any case be theologically useless, because if it was real, it would reduce God to one member of a pair of opposites, so conferring a spurious reality on this quasi-nothing.

What Frithjof Schuon says about creation¹² is clearly in line with what has been quoted in connection with the Kabbalah. He first makes the point that creation out of nothing corresponds to the aspect of discontinuity between God and the world, while emanation corresponds to the aspect of continuity between them. Furthermore, he shows that the infinity of the Divine nature implies something analogous to relativity in God, thanks to which there must arise subordinate beings which are in some respects commensurate with God, as with the Sephiroth, and from thence creation as we know it. Implicit in this approach is an idea which Schuon expresses elsewhere, that the Semitic religions sometimes try to exclude the intellect from things for which it is in fact adequate, as in the present subject, for example. We can understand the emergence of the world from God in a way which is “freely necessary” and “necessarily free,” as he puts it. Were it simply “drawn from the void,” it would have to be totally other than God, as the Manichaeans taught.

Similarly, James S. Cutsinger shows that a creation drawn from an objective nothing is not necessary to safeguard the freedom which pertains to God by definition.¹³ The “necessity of manifestation” and the “gift of creation” are a false opposition because absoluteness has its intrinsic and self-imposed necessities. God cannot be other than good, cannot be untruthful, or less than all-powerful. Could limits of this kind exclude God’s self-manifestation? Not inasmuch as God is necessarily good, because the good by definition communicates itself. The inability to be other than good would therefore mean an inability not to be

¹² *Logic and Transcendence*, ch. 6, by Frithjof Schuon, Translated by Peter N. Townsend (Perennial Books, London, 1975)

¹³ See *Sacred Web I*, (Vancouver, B.C., July 1998), p. 91, “On Earth as it is in Heaven” by James S. Cutsinger

manifest, and the highest freedom results in a necessary “passing-outside” Himself.

Another View of “Nothing”

The use of the *ex nihilo* as we know it today has been explained by Philip Sherrard¹⁴ in terms of pragmatism, since he does not recognize any metaphysical insight in it, but only a need to emphasize God’s transcendence, and so to prevent a worship of nature or natural forces. If he is right, the need to close a door on pagan beliefs was considered during the Middle Ages to be more necessary for salvation than the need for a metaphysically correct account of the relation of God and the world. The resulting belief that the world was created from an “objective nothing” existing alongside God can easily evoke the idea of the *Yin* which is inseparable from the *Yang*. Sherrard points out that, if understood in this way – and common sense nearly always works in this way –, the result is a deep, quasi-Manichaeic kind of dualism, subject to which creation is divided from God in an almost absolute manner, since nothingness is by definition non-intelligible. Worse still, such an objective nothing could also have the same function as the eternal objective matter prior to creation which the theologians sought to avoid with the *ex nihilo*. In either case, it is a question of something wholly external to God, requiring the consequence that any creation which arises in it must be similarly external to God. God and creation would after all be two different orders of reality without intrinsic relation.

Such a creation could not serve as a theophany, and this would exclude gnosis, so that man could not then be conceived as the mediator between God and creation, given that this world was so much “Godless raw material,” as Sherrard puts it. In this case, even the metaphysical faculty would be vitiated, and here one can see the doctrinal origin of the profane world which is believed in, almost universally in modern times.

In defense of the idea of a continuity between God and the world, Sherrard emphasizes the role of mankind as the “sole bond and synthetic link” between God and nature. This is necessary because God

¹⁴ Philip Sherrard, *Christianity: Lineaments of a Sacred Tradition* (Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1999), Ch. 10

cannot be intrinsically present in what is by definition outside Him, while that which is outside God cannot participate in divinity simply because it was created. He reinforces this with the interesting insight that creation has a mediating role between God and man which complements the mediating role of man between God and creation.¹⁵ Such relationships exclude the idea of a world based on an external nothingness.

Modern history shows that this avoidance of a nature-idolatry by means of the *ex nihilo* has succeeded only by giving rise to something as bad. To have feelings of worship towards a world which is believed to be interpenetrated by God would be a relatively harmless idolatry compared with a secular worship of a world which is conceived as being *per se* external to God. This state of mind is precisely that of modern man, who idolizes his position in a material world which is never connected with any kind of spiritual principle. Those who unintentionally brought this about did not foresee the materialistic paganism that was finally to receive its rationale from the doctrinal position they constructed, if only because it is open to perversion by those who lack goodwill. Modern materialism secondarily results from the way in which the *ex nihilo* creates an artificial divide between Christian thought and Platonism, as it divides theology from a universal spiritual philosophy. Such a divide is felt to be necessary by those who think that the historical originality of Christ's revelation must imply a similar originality for the ideas by which that revelation is to be interpreted. Those who think in this way fail to see that questions of confessional origins are out of place here, because metaphysical principles do not depend on anything in space or time, even when they are vehicles of revelation, since they are universal and eternal. The negative view of creation which arises from the emotive and extra-doctrinal consequences of the *ex nihilo* is shown by Whitall Perry to be inseparable from an unfounded belief that the external world is made up of subsistent objects which are independent of any relation to a subject, this belief being also the same delusion which makes it possible for people to believe in evolutionist teachings.¹⁶ In reality, there can be no such thing as an object except in relation to a

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.243

¹⁶ Whitall N. Perry, *The Widening Breach* (Quinta Essentia, Cambridge, 1995), chs.1-2

perceiving subject, and this means that the true reality which cosmology has to account for consists, not of objects, but of psycho-physical, bipolar entities. This shows that the material creation, far from being some external artefact, is intrinsically bound to the soul, and thereby to the spirit, and thence to God. This wonderful continuum confronts us directly, and it cannot be consigned to an origin external to God.

The Contingency of Creation

There remains the question as to whether the non-necessary or contingent nature of all beings apart from God follows in the same way if creation is by means of the Forms and matter, which proceed from God by means of the Logos, and does not involve any external nothing. How does contingency differ here from the case where everything, Forms and material world together, are all equally produced from the same void external to God? Here it can be seen that in the former case, creation is univocally affiliated to God, whereas in the latter it is founded only on a kind of compromise between God and the void. If there is an element of contingency in either case, it is clearly much aggravated in the latter. Just because the world is not, like God, necessary *per se* in the sense of being self-existent, it does not follow that it must be contingent *per se* either, because there is the third possibility that it may have a derivative necessity. This would be more in keeping with the idea of creation which is presented here, one for which the material and contingent reality is interpenetrated by universal spiritual realities.

The idea that the world must be essentially contingent is also mistakenly believed to follow from the teaching that God makes the world freely, that is, without any imposed necessity. This conclusion depends on our thinking of God as being subject to time like ourselves. In reality the Divine will has no beginning of action, if for God to be and to act are inseparable. (If they were separable, the Divine nature would be lacking in unity). Besides, freedom and necessity combine as well as contrast, such that God can freely create something necessary, just as well as something non-necessary. Conversely, an unfree creator could be compelled to create something non-necessary just as well as something necessary.

In the light of the idea that the formative principles of the world

come directly from God, not by a distribution of the Divine nature as such, but in the manner in which relative beings arise from divine power subject to the principle of undiminished giving, it follows that the manifest world must indeed be made from necessarily-existent archetypes in the order of emanation. The truth of this can be seen *a contrario* from what would follow if God really did will a non-necessary creation. One way in which this could be brought about would be precisely from the use of a matter coeval with and independent of God, as referred to above. Creatures made from such an independent matter would be truly contingent, having no more intrinsic relation to God than has the external matter. In this case, a required conclusion would follow from a heretical premise.

Another way in which a non-necessary creation could theoretically be brought into being would follow from a premise which is believed to imply necessity. Suppose an act of creation which was unfree, that is, imposed *per impossibile* on God's will by some other power. In this case, creation would not be adequately grounded in either the Divine will or that of the other agent; rather, it would result from two inharmonious wills, instead of one. The world would then indeed be fundamentally incoherent, and God's omnipotence would be excluded by its radical disorder. Thus what is usually taken to imply the non-necessity of the world, namely God's freedom in creating it, is better suited to its necessity, when more closely considered. The belief that the created world is all one great contingency proceeds from an assumption that God's necessary being is exclusive, so that it cannot be shared in any way by other beings, even though they may share any number of other Divine attributes. Such an assumption reflects an Aristotelian idea of substance, which cannot be modified by any independent Form, but in no way does it reflect a Platonic one, for which participation is the rule. If Form and matter are inseparable, as they are for Aristotle, all substances must be mutually exclusive, with no subsistent essences for them to share in, and so "meeting in mere oppugnancy." Such thinking is essentially materialistic.

Conversely, if the Forms have an independent subsistence, as in Platonism, there would be no limit to the qualities in which created substances could participate in Divine attributes, and in ways which would resolve their conflicts. If we accept the Platonic premise, and

exclude the ideas of an alien matter and of an “objective nothing,” there would then be nothing to prevent the participation in some of the Divine attributes by created beings. Since the spiritual sharing in the Divine through the Eucharist by human means is essentially a part of orthodoxy, those who deny this sharing as a cosmic reality are the ones who need to prove their position, not those who affirm it. There is nothing Christian about the Aristotelian position here.

By its very nature, contingency is inseparable from the temporal state of human consciousness, which is confined to perceptions of momentary appearances of things in three dimensions, rapidly succeeding one another. The successive three-dimensional states which are encountered with the passage of time are never experienced as a continuum by the senses, although these states are only the fleeting appearances of their permanent extension in a higher dimension. In relation to the latter state, contingency is only a physical limitation, analogous to the way in which objects in space are limited by their own surfaces. Where things are thought of as brought into being by continual increments or projections, therefore, this can only apply to their temporal appearances. In this connection, Urs von Balthasar provides some instructive passages which show something of the effect of the *ex nihilo* idea on the understanding of metaphysics. For example, he states in his exposition of Eckhart’s teachings that “They (creatures) exist only insofar as they are constantly receiving themselves from God,”¹⁷ as though the temporal process were universal. Not surprisingly, this follows a conclusion that creatures are in themselves nothing, on the ground that the world’s entire being comes from God and is not other than God. If this were literally true, there could not even be anything there to “receive itself,” since this receiver would have to have some independent being in order to exercise this function. If the temporal process is as essential as it is made out to be here, this receiver would in any case no longer be able to function outside time. In eternity, therefore, it would no longer have any reason to exist on leaving this world. Besides, a question of definition is involved here: whether creatures are nothing-

¹⁷ See *Theodrama*: “In the Triune Life”, p. 442. Whether this is meant to be Balthasar’s own position or not does not matter for the present purpose, since it is simply a question of examining the theoretical consequences of the *ex nihilo*.

or nothing but God - they could not in either case be creatures, strictly speaking. If the word “creation” means anything, it must signify the production of substances other than God.

Even though the “ground of the soul” is referred to in a related passage by von Balthasar, it would seem to be for him no more than a mirror which reflects realities properly so-called. In addition to this, there is a separate question of nothingness which arises from a simple dichotomy between the finite and the Infinite. On this basis, the finite must be nothing, at least in a relative sense. However, there is no simple pair of opposites here, that is, a pure infinite and a pure finite, because every relative finite partakes of the infinite to some degree and there are different orders of infinity, which are realized in the Great Chain of Being.

The common mistake in this realm is the belief that the *creatio ex nihilo* must follow necessarily from the fact that God does not have to use anything external to Himself in order to create. God’s Self-sufficiency has in fact no such relation to, or dependence on, any supposedly real nothing. Inevitably, the *ex nihilo* idea has had considerable influence on the way in which spiritual experience has been interpreted over the centuries. On a practical and psychological level it has helped many minds of an extraverted kind to find an answer to the attraction of the world and its deceptive plenitude. Nevertheless, if the implied view of creation were taken for a theoretical truth, it would undermine the relation to God which is necessarily at the centre of this kind of experience.

The root of confusions about the reality of the self come from a naturalistic kind of thought, which condenses the possibilities of being down to just those of God and “non-God,” ignoring the way in which innumerable intermediate degrees of being from God downward are participations in divinity. Even the function of creation is delegated to varying degrees through lower levels of being. This rules out the idea of one side of a dichotomy being purely and simply everything and the other being purely and simply nothing.

At the same time, one must allow for the fact that more than theory is involved here, because there is a spiritual need to justify a humbler and more realistic conception of creaturehood in relation to a modern ethos for which even the distinction of Creator and creature is an example of

a false dualism, and also in reaction against a culture where God is ignored by people who effectively make gods of themselves in defiance of reason.

However, the benefit of its correction of the pagan outlook will be lost if it appears that it too can only make its point by a denial of reason. If the truth that *God needs nothing* to make the world is given a semantic twist which suggests that God actually does need a kind of “real nothing” wherewith to do so, all reasonable attempts to create an awareness of man’s dependence and relativity will be undermined by a false premise. It should be noted that this mistaken idea is not the same as Aristotle’s idea of Privation, according to which all things in nature have less Form in them than they could have. This reflects the Platonic position that matter is never wholly mastered by the Forms, but this deficiency results only from the world’s finitude, not from the means by which it is created.

Conclusions

The *ex nihilo* idea, it was said, was originally found necessary to counter a tendency to Pantheism. That tendency itself was made potentially a live issue by changes involved by the “elevation” of Aristotle during the Middle Ages, which led to a denial the subsistent reality of the Forms, and made them solely ideas in the mind of God.¹⁸ The latter are no doubt the ultimate causes of the Forms, but to deny their separate existence is to break up the Great Chain of Being by removing its highest members. In this case, it could no longer be said that God creates the world by means of the first beings to arise “after” God; it could only be said that the world was created from God *as God*, which is pantheism precisely. This logical conclusion could only be blocked, as was pointed out above, by an idea which would divide God from the world in a radical manner, namely the *ex nihilo* idea. Nevertheless, this is an *ad hoc* solution to a problem, which arises from a mingling of the psychological with the metaphysical, over-extending the requirements of doctrine.

Because of its pragmatic function, the *ex nihilo* is not a logically nec-

¹⁸ This is not Christian by origin: a pre-Christian source of this idea can be found in Philo of Alexandria, see: A.E.Taylor, *Plato*, (London Methuen, 1966) ch. 2

essary conclusion from the doctrine that God creates everything without external means, except as a tautology which only analyses the idea itself. Neither is this doctrine of the Divine self-sufficiency in any need of support from the *ex nihilo* or anything else, because it contains its own certainty.

Whatever its uses from an ideological point of view, the division of the world from God made by the *ex nihilo* naturally gives rise to the conception of a world with no necessary connection to God (which was done in a different way by the subsumption of the Forms in God). Such a world is a self-subsistent world, the exact opposite of what the theologians intended to teach. In regard to such a world-concept, if true, one could have the right to think of God as a contingency which could reasonably be disbelieved in. If the world is a contingency in relation to God, one cannot avoid the implication that God must be a contingency in relation to the world. Thus an open door to agnosticism is created, regardless of its lack of justification. The origin of this conceptual disrelation between God and world lies in an attempt to create a specifically Christian metaphysic in response to the needs of a particular historical era, but its long-term outcome is far from Christian.

The use of an ambivalent idea, which is true as a tautology (in which “nothing” means “nothing but God”), but not true at all as a statement which purports to relate different realities, is in any case an obstacle to exact knowledge. However, its development from the esoteric by a process of inversion has happened in the history of tradition, and for this reason, it could be argued that traditionalists have no right to criticize it, since it must appear to be the way in which the Holy Spirit has led the Church. Must it not be the will of God? The fact that it served a spiritual need before it began to cast its shadow in modern times means that there is no simple answer to this question. It is now Yes, inasmuch as God permissively wills the final degeneration of the Kali Yuga, but No, inasmuch as God wills that man should adhere to the whole truth his faculties were created for.

There are other reasons for the retention of the *ex nihilo*, some of which appear to support an idea of historical originality which does not combine very well with the universality of metaphysics. Without it, there would be no firm dividing-line between Christian doctrine and Neoplatonism, regardless of how much they differ in themselves and in

their origins. A substantial region of common principles would be clearly visible, and this would raise questions as to the degree of inspiration of the Platonic tradition, which would have to be acknowledged as a work of the Holy Spirit. An acceptance of the “naturally supernatural” nature of the intellect, as expressed by Frithjof Schuon, would make this possible, but given the present on-going reaction against truths enshrined in Greek tradition, this is not to be looked for in exoteric teachings today. It is unfortunate that the sense of mortal contingency and insufficiency in man’s natural life, which must be faced if conversion is to happen, can be justified by the same idea of reality as would support materialism. Apart from all questions of psychological needs and opportuneness, it nevertheless remains a universal law that “nothing comes out of nothing,” and it is only by a distortion of orthodox doctrine that one can be led to suppose that revealed truth requires exceptions to it.