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CREATION OUT OF NOTHING

IN THE development of Christian thought on the doctrine of creation, the central theological idea to emerge is *creatio ex nihilo* (Latin = 'creation out of nothing'). This idea affirms that before God's first creative act, nothing else existed except the triune God Himself. The psalmist wrote: "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting You are God" (Psalm 90:2). Only God is eternal—not the universe, nor any other thing.

The *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) idea is implied in the Bible's opening verse: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). Some scholars understand this verse as a stand-alone or summary statement referring to the creation of all things (i.e., a *merism*[1]), followed by the details of how that took place. Others adopt a more face-value understanding; God first creates the heavens (space) and the earth within space. Both entities are otherwise empty (v. 2), ready for Him to populate with the celestial bodies and biological entities that He is about to create.

In both understandings, Genesis 1:1 affirms that the almighty God brought all things into being from nothing. Hebrews 11:3 provides further support: "By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible." A passage in Psalm 33 carries the same implication:

> "By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth all their host. ...
> For He spoke, and it came to be;
> He commanded, and it stood firm" (Psalm 33:6,9).

Too many commentators, intimidated by long-age 'science', read millions of years and evolution into these passages. But this violates the clear impression these verses convey. Also, God's "Let there be …" commands in Genesis 1 (verses 3, 6, 9, 11, 14–15 etc.) suggest that His creative acts took place *instantaneously*. God is the Creator of time, so is not bound by it. No wonder the psalmist felt compelled to proclaim: "Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him!" (Psalm 33:8).

'Creation out of nothing' has important theological implications. For example, it rules out the idea that matter is eternal (Genesis 1:1; Psalm 90:2). This principle also excludes any form of *dualism* in which another kind of existence or power stands over against God and outside His control. In this scenario, God is only one among two or more competing entities. Thus, He is always finite, struggling to overcome an opposing entity of equal stature and power. If any uncreated entity or substance had already existed, we would have no assurance that God had, or has, the authority and power to control it.

Denial of the *ex nihilo* principle therefore poses serious challenges to God's independence, His sovereignty, and His right to be the sole focus of our worship. What confidence could we have that every part of the universe, including the spiritual realm, will ultimately fulfil God's purposes unless He had created every part of it?

Did God create evil, then?

But if we insist that a good, omnipotent, and loving God created *everything* from nothing, how, then, can we account for evil? In the biblical account of humanity's Fall (Genesis 3), the *serpent* is explicitly God's handiwork, *crafty* as he is (verse 1). Genesis 3 "speaks not of evil invading, as though it had its own existence, but of creatures rebelling."[2] Other philosophies see evil as part of the structure of experience and reality. For example, the religions of Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism are dualistic: they propose that a good god is opposed by an equally powerful evil god. But in the biblical perspective, sin and death came *after* creation, not with it.

Though freedom is good in itself and essential to give human life uniqueness, meaning, and value, it opens up the possibility of evil. Evil resulted from humankind's wilful disobedience of God's explicit command (Genesis 2:16–17; 3:6). In the New Testament, Paul elaborates on the tragic consequences of sin for humankind and for creation itself (Romans 5:12–21; 8:20–23; 1 Corinthians 15:21–22).

For Christians, the fundamental evil is not the loss of fame, fortune, security, or even life itself, but rather the loss of communion with God for which we were made (Mark 8:36–37; cf. Philippians 3:7–11). Earthly affairs are thus evaluated insofar as they affect one's relationship to God.

The Creator-creature distinction

Further, the *ex nihilo* principle indicates that God is distinct from His creation. God did not make the world out of Himself; creation is not an extension of His being. This rules out *pantheism* ('everything is God'), in which the distinction between God and His creation is blurred.[3]

In identifying God with His creation, pantheism denies several essential aspects of God's character. If the whole universe is God, then He has no distinct personality. Also, God is no longer unchanging, because as the universe changes, so does He. Furthermore, He is no longer holy, because the evil in the universe is also part of His being. Ultimately, pantheistic belief systems, such as several Eastern religions, end up denying the importance of individual human personality. Since everything is God, the individual's goal is to blend in with the universe––and thus lose one's own uniqueness as an individual. Pantheism devalues not only God's personal identity but also that of human beings.[4]

Crucially, the *ex nihilo* principle affirms that God's creation was not only good (Genesis 1:31), but real as well. It is not some illusion, or thought in God's mind, but an entity with an individual existence. The assertion that creation is real does not mean it is independent. Since it did not bring itself into existence, it has no inherent power to sustain that existence. *Ex nihilo* also means it was not fashioned from something pre-existing from which it might have inherited some self-sustaining principle. The *ex nihilo* formula thus readily implies that the creature's continuing existence depends on God's sustaining power.

God is no absentee who, having wound up the universe and set it in motion, then left it to its own devices, and now lives in transcendent isolation (a view known as *deism*). On the contrary, He is ceaselessly active in the control and care of all that He has made. He takes responsibility for the continuance of all life on Earth (Psalm 104:27–30; cf. 65:9–13). The psalmist points to God's gracious provision of food and shelter for humankind—a need also felt by birds and wild animals, for which He also caters, even in this fallen world (Psalm 104:14–18). Paul reminded the Athenians of this Creator God, in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28; cf. Colossians 1:16–17).

Why is *ex nihilo* important?

The distinction between God's being and our being is underlined by the fact of sin as a significant act of rebellion against God. In becoming rightly related to God, we do not shed our creaturely status but rather become "a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Our dependence and transience do not make us worthless, but neither do our reality and potential value make us deity.

Freedom and purpose

A further major implication of *creatio ex nihilo* is that God's creative activity is to be understood in terms of freedom and purpose. Creation is a free act of God determined only by His sovereign will, and in no way dictated by necessity. He is independent and self-sufficient (Exodus 3:14). Paul proclaimed to the Athenians:

> "The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, *nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything*,

since He Himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything" (Acts 17:24–25, italics added).

One cannot read the creation account (Genesis 1:1–2:3) without being profoundly impressed by God's majestic and purposeful creation of every facet of the universe. He does it effortlessly, simply speaking every facet of the universe into existence. The account emphasizes His sovereignty and the goodness of His handiwork, culminating in the creation of the man and the woman "in His own image" (Genesis 1:26–27). What might have remained formless and empty (Genesis 1:2) was purposefully and systematically shaped by God into something of great beauty for their habitation, benefit, and enjoyment (Genesis 2:8–9; cf. Isaiah 45:18).

Theistic evolution vs biblical creation

It seems incongruous, therefore, that some would adopt a theistic evolutionary approach to this account. Randomness is a major characteristic of all evolutionary theories. But this is totally out of keeping with the calm, deliberate, systematic manner in which God spoke into being every part of His creation.

Furthermore, the long-age timeframe required for the supposed evolutionary process to work fosters a style of interpretation that is foreign to the Genesis writer's intention. Even renowned non-evangelical Hebrew scholars such as Marcus Dods (1834–1909) and James Barr (1924–2006) testify to this. They acknowledge—although they don't believe it happened that way—that the writer intended to convey the idea that creation took place in a series of six 24-hour days rather than long eras of time.[5] We render honour to God when we take this portion of His Word as it was meant to be taken—in its plain historical and literal sense.

God the Creator and God the Redeemer are explicitly identified in biblical faith (Psalm 146:5–9; Isaiah 43:1; 44:21–28; John 1:1–12; Colossians 1:15–23). The loving God who redeems us through Christ is none other than the almighty God who created the universe from nothing. The promise of redemption, of which God's love is one basis, has as its other foundation His absolute and total supremacy over all that exists. *Creatio ex nihilo*, therefore, is foundational for the proclamation of the Gospel with confidence, even in the face of evil.

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References and notes

1. Stating two extremes to infer the totality of all inbetween too, e.g., 'from the east to the west'. In this case, 'the entire universe'.
2. Kidner, D., *Genesis,* The Tyndale Press, London, p. 67, 1967.
3. The same can be said for the closely related idea of panentheism—'everything is in God' (or a part of God). This also attributes deity to the universe, but unlike in pantheism, God is more than the universe.
4. For these insights into where pantheism leads, I am indebted to Grudem W., *Systematic Theology,* InterVarsity Press, Leicester, UK, pp. 268–9, 1994 (reprinted 2003).
5. As noted in Kelly, D.F., *Creation and change,* Christian Focus Publications, Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, UK, pp. 50–51, 1997; updated 2017. See reviews creation.com/kelly and creation.com/kelly2.