THE DIFFERENCE NOTHING MAKES: *CREATIO EX NIHILO,* RESURRECTION, AND DIVINE GRATUITY

BRIAN D. ROBINETTE

In response to recent charges that creatio ex nihilo *imposes a dubious metaphysics upon biblical theologies of creation, with the result that divine power is valorized at the expense of a creation in process, the author argues that such criticisms misrepresent the doctrine's logic that illuminates those biblical theologies while making explicit in philosophical terms the gratuitous and noncontrastive relationship between God and creation. Issues of power, evil, and forgiveness are discussed as the author analyzes the doctrine's logic and historical development.*

THE DOCTRINE OF *CREATIO EX NIHILO* has come under sharp criticism in recent years by those who see in it an alien imposition of metaphysics upon biblical theologies of creation. Noting as a matter of historical record that the doctrine's formal development comes subsequent to the biblical tradition, such critics argue that while ostensibly designed to affirm the sovereignty of God and the goodness of matter in the mid-second-century disputes with Middle Platonism and gnosticism, "creation from nothing" in fact represents a capitulation to a metaphysical view of God in which power (omnipotence) serves as its governing predicate. The consequences of this "metaphysical turn" in theology are multiple, and multiply disastrously, argues John Caputo in his *The Weakness of God* (2006).

Working in close company with Catherine Keller and Jacques Derrida, among others, Caputo maintains that *creatio ex nihilo* represents the "dream of metaphysical theology" enthralled by the idea of God's absolute dominion over creation and nonbeing, and thus a God who excludes and expels all that evinces liminality, ambiguity, and process—that is, the "chaos" of the deep. With deconstructive interests at hand Caputo interrogates the scriptural narratives to retrieve disruptive nuances and creative possibilities that he believes have long been suppressed in the theological tradition. The work of "theopoetics," as he describes his project, eschews

BRIAN ROBINETTE received his Ph.D. from the University of Notre Dame and is now associate professor in the Department of Theological Studies, Saint Louis University. Specializing in Christology, theological anthropology, and philosophical theology, he has recently published *Grammars of Resurrection: A Christian Theology of Presence and Absence* (2009). In progress is a monograph on theological anthropology.

the metaphysics of power and opts instead for envisioning God as a "weak force": a God who, rather than bringing all things into being from literally "nothing," creates by eliciting life from the preexistent deep (*tehom*) of the waters, from the fathomless potentiality of the void (*tohu wa-bohu*). Whereas the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* would suppress indeterminacy in the interests of affirming an ultimate and simple origin to things—with "God" serving as that ultimate power policing creation's boundaries—this alternative, more biblical view embraces the messiness of creation as a "beautiful risk."[1]

A related concern for Caputo is that an omnipotent God is not credible in the face of suffering and evil. With occasional appeal to process philosophy and theology, Caputo alerts us to the horns of our dilemma: a God who can create from nothing is responsible for the world's contingencies, including its many unspeakable horrors, and thus cannot be affirmed as wholly good. The only way we can continue to affirm God's unqualified goodness is if we abandon all "strong theologies" preoccupied with divine omnipotence. God is not simply weak on the basis of willed restraint; God *is* weak, or, is a "weak force" capable only of luring contingent creation through the "event" of invitation. If stirring within the deep is the creative potential for beauty and harmony, so too may *tehomic* energies fragment and destroy. Creation unleashed is an ongoing process that we, along with God, cocreate, enjoy, and endure in hope. The promise of creation is "a promise that keeps its fingers crossed."[2]

The argumentative burden of this article is to show that Caputo's characterization of *creatio ex nihilo* is deeply misleading. Though I wish to affirm much of what appeals to Caputo in his theopoetics—not least a view of God as noncoercive love, a God whose creation exhibits contingency and open-endedness—I do not believe he demonstrates that the classical affirmations of *creatio ex nihilo* and divine omnipotence are responsible for all he heaps upon them. On the contrary, these affirmations are precisely what enable us more richly and consistently to envision creation as gift. The constructive purpose of engaging Caputo's work here is that it affords an opportunity to appreciate the point of *creatio ex nihilo*, which, when taken as an isolated matter of abstract reflection, runs the risk of losing its rich significance within theological discourse.

I will proceed first by showing that *creatio ex nihilo* affirms God's unconditioned transcendence in a way that expressly avoids construing the God-world relationship in contrastive terms. It reflects a basic "grammar" for speaking of God and creation in a way that names their absolute,

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[1] John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 2005) 64 and passim.
[2] Ibid. 93.

qualitative difference—a difference that allows us to affirm divine transcendence precisely *as* God's incomprehensible nearness. This "difference nothing makes" can also help us appreciate what divine omnipotence might mean. It does not mean domination, which is the way Caputo frames his analysis of power, and which forces him to set up an untenable dichotomy between "strong" and "weak" theologies. Caputo tends to reverse the terms he opposes, without appreciating that it is just this dichotomy that the affirmations of divine transcendence and *creatio ex nihilo* mean to subvert.

Finally, I aim to show the internal consistency of *creatio ex nihilo* with the central affirmation of the New Testament: Jesus' resurrection from the dead. The event of Easter opened up for Christians a perspective on God's creativity in a significantly new light. Creation from nothing is logically coherent with (and in Christian theology historically dependent upon) a view of a God who raises to life what has succumbed to the *nihil* of death. A post-Easter narrative imagination, not unmoored metaphysical speculation, underwrites its discovery. By raising Jesus from the dead—from a Christian point of view, this is the definitive manifestation of divine "power"—what is revealed is a God of forgiving hospitality, a God whose boundless generativity is not agonistic or contrastive with creation, but pacific, pardoning, and self-diffusive.

Such a view, it must be admitted, will not do much to theoretically explain evil and suffering, which, along with Caputo, I am wont to avoid; but it does constitute the Christian *hope* that evil, suffering, and death do not have the final word. Indeed, despite Caputo's intention to avoid theodicy, his claim that divine omnipotence must be rejected, should we wish honestly to face the mystery of suffering, does more to explain that mystery than most classical approaches, and without any obvious advantage in its practical overcoming.

A SPECTRUM OF POSITIONS

There are three positions one might take in assessing the status of *creatio ex nihilo* and its relationship to the biblical traditions. The first is that *creatio ex nihilo*, as it gained a formal character in the second and third centuries, represents an innovation that imposes something new and largely foreign upon the biblical traditions thought to support it. The genealogies accounting for the historical and ideological factors leading to this imposition may vary in detail, but the basic contention such critics share is that its ascendancy is emblematic of a failure and an eclipse, an ill-fated fall into a metaphysical picture that retrojects a set of considerations about God and cosmic origins that the biblical narratives do not raise and cannot be legitimately enlisted for support.

A second position recognizes the innovative character of *creatio ex nihilo*, but views its normative status as consistent with and illuminating of the biblical traditions. The development might be compared to the emergence of the christological doctrines. If one can grant that the interaction between scriptural traditions and Greek philosophy led to creative syntheses exhibiting both novelty and fidelity in christological reflection—and in fact one sees this interaction already occurring in the New Testament itself—then, similarly, the considerations entailed in the doctrine of creation from nothing need not be thought of as merely late, or fabrications of dubious eisegesis, but as providing an interpretive framework that helps us better to understand those scriptural traditions. Even if many of the accounts of creation in Scripture remain unclear as to whether God creates *ex nihilo* in any strict sense, once the question of unoriginate matter became live, it was incumbent upon theologians to clarify the point. The doctrine as formally articulated by Tatian, Theophilus of Antioch, Irenaeus of Lyons, and Tertullian draws the appropriate conclusion, once the issue was posed.

The third (and most conventional) position is that postbiblical theologies of *creatio ex nihilo* are not innovative at all but fully continuous with the content of those biblical traditions clearly supporting it. Even if a more technical conceptuality is at work in its later elaboration, the content is the same. The biblical traditions reveal little ambiguity; any fair-minded analysis will show their intent to narrate the act of creation as not dependent upon some prior potentiality or raw material that God fortuitously discovers and against which God must eternally contend. If some early-church theologians, such as Justin Martyr, taught that God created the world from preexistent unformed matter, this will be viewed as, say, an uncritical reception of Plato's cosmological speculations in the *Timeaus*, not as a valid inference from Scripture.

While Caputo (and Catherine Keller[3]) opt for the first position, my own view accords with the second, at least in outline.[4] Recent attempts have been made to argue the third position, though I will not consider them here.[5] By taking the second position, it is not essential to my argument that the doctrine's unambiguous affirmation be traced back throughout all the

[3] See Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (London: Routledge, 2003).

[4] My own views on the historical developments leading to the doctrine's formulation are generally sympathetic with Gerhard May's now-classic study, *Creatio ex nihilo: The Doctrine of "Creation out of Nothing" in Early Christian Thought* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994).

[5] See Paul Copan and William Lane Craig, *Creation Out of Nothing: A Biblical, Philosophical, and Scientific Exploration* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004).

various strata of the biblical canon. Indeed, it is instructive to appreciate its emergence, especially as it intertwines with parallel developments in eschatology. As we will see, protology and eschatology in Christian theology are mutually informative and find in *creatio ex nihilo* a theo-logical meeting place.

THE GRAMMAR OF TRANSCENDENCE, THE GRAMMAR OF POWER

Before examining this interaction between protology and eschatology in the biblical traditions, I first deal with some formal considerations of *creatio ex nihilo* as they relate to objections to classical affirmations of divine transcendence and omnipotence. At issue is the sort of grammar (or rules of speech) operative in such affirmations. My central contention is that if *creatio ex nihilo* is elaborated in a "contrastive" manner, as Kathryn Tanner puts it,[6] then its meaning will become irretrievably distorted, with the result that its explicit rejection or modification in favor of presumed alternatives may amount to a subtle acceptance of onto-theological terms, i.e., that God and world coexist within a continuum, and so relate on a competitive basis. A more adequate understanding of *creatio ex nihilo* sees in it a systematic denial. Far from making the origin and ground of creation accessible to full comprehension, the statement requires the work of an apophatic discourse that opens up human understanding to the utter gratuity of creation. Nothing is necessary about creation at all. It derives wholly from the incomprehensible mystery of the creator God whose relationship to creation remains one of loving freedom and fidelity. Rather than implying an agonistic picture that situates God and creation in a relationship of rivalry—such a picture only underwrites the serialization of binary and hierarchically arranged terms (e.g., power/weakness, higher/lower, spirit/body, male/female, active/passive, etc.)—*creatio ex nihilo* in fact ruptures such a picture as it emphatically denies that God is "part" of any continuum whatsoever.

Either/Or?

According to Caputo, *creatio ex nihilo* represents a disfigurement of the biblical narratives, one that has turned a more Hebraic vision of creation into "a tale of pure, simple, clean act of power carried out on high by a timeless and supersensible being, a very Hellenic story that also goes along with a top-down social structure of imperial power flowing down from on high."[7] Caputo would have us take notice of the metaphysician's

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[6] Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988).
[7] Caputo, *Weakness of God* 59.

selective memory that sweeps under the rug of dogma the fragments and unnerving indeterminacies of the creation narratives in their extant form. "We ever-suspicious sacred anarchists, we who have a strong affection for weak theology, suspect foul play."[8] Who is this "we," and how did it ever come to be that "they" buried the bodies?

It is hard not to notice that Caputo relishes the role of the gadfly and exile from a kingdom of orthodoxy that denies him credentials for admission. One might view the constant refrain of "we anarchists" throughout *The Weakness of God* as the seriously playful work of the ironist, since what frequently passes as acceptably orthodox seems decidedly unplayful, far too confident in its ability to trace origins, establish historical continuities, and monitor boundaries. Yet such self-identification risks making the work of the ironist more acutely ironic, but not in the way intended, since the rhetoric might only deepen the very "we"-and-"they" polarization so passionately decried. I point out this recurrent rhetorical feature because it highlights a more basic dichotomization that contributes to the caricature of the doctrine Caputo would deconstruct. The "we"-and "they"-polarization extends throughout his treatment in the sharply delineated categories of "weak" and "strong," Hebraic and Greek, heterodox and orthodox, and finally *creatio ex profundis* and *creatio ex nihilo*. The terms seem to be set up too conveniently for argument's sake, with the consequence that the deconstructionist's professional sensitization to dualities and oppressive hierarchies achieves largely a reversal of terms rather than their fundamental questioning. Consider the following statements:

Divine omnipotence is a concept fulfilled in fantasy, spinning wildly in ideal space, with absolute velocity, while the brutal course of the real world proceeds at a slower, bloodier pace.

No wonder, then, that the idea of absolute omnipotence did not arise from biblical and historical experience, but rather arose from a metaphysical debate among ecclesiastical theologians in the process of consolidating institutional power who seized upon a biblical idea (*con-capere*) and set it loose into infinity in a way that neither historical nor religious experience could support.

The mainstream orthodox tradition has drummed the primal elements out of the discussion in order to make way for *creatio ex nihilo*, which makes for a cleaner cut, everything black and white, and gives things a firm foundation. The theological tradition thinks that God comes out ahead this way, that God is even greater and mightier, and that God is a greater giver of gifts if God's gift-giving were complete, including both form and matter, exhaustively ex nihilo.[9]

Before looking at the particulars of the historical development of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, we must notice straightaway that it (and its

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[8] Ibid.   [9] Ibid. 80, 85.

corollary, divine omnipotence[10]) is objectionable as ideological fantasy, concocted and peddled by a theological elite. It serves as a classic case study in religious neurosis and projection, for by locking God up in a solipsistic bubble of absolute sovereignty, it inures those who maintain it from the harsh realities of history. The biblical traditions do not affirm creation from nothing in the sense articulated in the second and third centuries CE but presume God's creative activity as drawing from *tehomic* depths that have no bottom, no absolute origin, and no lasting determination. Creation is an interminable process of becoming in which God solicits our participation. *Creatio ex nihilo* excludes all meaningful sense of becoming, we are told, for not only does divine creativity operate under such terms by absolute *fiat*, but it also means that the world comes ready-made. Stasis, not dynamism; closure, not openness; force, not invitation is the result of this metaphysically stifling world-picture. "My idea," writes Caputo, "which is deeply sympathetic with the critique of omnipotence in process theologians, is to shift the emphasis on the Genesis narratives back from power to goodness, back from being to life, back from a muscle-flexing causal force to a gift-giving word who fashions life out of desert and deep."[11]

The choice Caputo sets before us is starkly binary: either theology must come to grips with a view of God who is "weak," and who brings life from *tehomic* depths that have no final master or origin, or theology continues to bury the slippery and stubborn textual bodies in the creation stories that signify those depths in order to maintain the consoling illusion that a cosmic puppet master controls all. Caputo's negative characterization of divine power and sovereignty is thus cast in a zero-sum relation with creation: either God is omnipotent, which rules out historical ambiguity and openness within creation, or God is a "weak force," in which case we must learn to accept a vision of creation as an ongoing process we undertake along with God. Or again, either we assert divine omnipotence, which entails an interventionist and "thaumaturgical" view of a God who "suspends or bends natural laws so that in the end things turn out just the way God has planned," or God is more like a "weak force" whose actual

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[10] I agree with Caputo that *creatio ex nihilo* and divine omnipotence are correlative, but not all scholars do. Jon Levenson, e.g., affirms divine omnipotence while denying *creatio ex nihilo*. See his rich and challenging study, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988).

[11] Caputo, *Weakness of God* 87. Caputo cites John Cobb and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Knoxville: Westminster John Knox, 1977); and Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY, 1983). Keller's engagement with process theology, feminism, and deconstruction informs Caputo's assessment as well.

existence we can never be quite sure of but whose name harbors the "event" of possibility.[12] "The power of God," writes Caputo, "is the weak force of a word, a meaning, a sense, a solicitation, an invitation, a hermeneutical rather than a physical or metaphysical rule, a call that calls us beyond ourselves and our self-concern, that assures us that the 'world' is not all in all."[13] If there is something attractive about this last statement—and there is—the only way it can be consistently affirmed, we are told, is by rejecting *creatio ex nihilo* as a dead-end metaphysical project.[14]

But must we accept this tidy characterization? Are we really at an impasse? Are there no resources in Christian theology, ancient or new, that might allow us to hold together the meaning of *creatio ex nihilo* and *creatio ex profundis* in closest unity, as not at all in competition for claiming our allegiance or inspiring our discourse and practice? Must unconditioned transcendence be fatally at odds with God's nearness? Must omnipotence even be at odds with vulnerability? Along these lines, we might ask whether Caputo's formulation of the problem reflects its own forgetfulness. For, as I will argue, his framing of the issue in fact shares unquestioned premises with modernity's problematizations of transcendence and power, resulting in the subtle acceptance of the very metaphysical terms Caputo seeks to deconstruct.

Transcendence (and so Immanence) without Reserve

Among the recurrent themes in contemporary theology, criticism of "classical" formulations of divine transcendence figures prominently. Often such criticism comes with the plea that an equal or greater emphasis be given to immanence to balance out some perceived one-sidedness in the theological tradition. Perhaps divine transcendence is thought to dispatch God to a realm of rarefied ideality, some remote space "out there" that leaves God indifferent to our human saga. Or perhaps the criticism views divine transcendence as a source of oppressive paternalism, and thus as the

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[12] Caputo, *Weakness of God* 178.   [13] Ibid. 180.
[14] This either/or characterization is similar to Keller's summary assessment: "According to the logic of *ex nihilo*, one is either good or evil, corporeal or incorporeal, eternal or temporal, almighty or powerless, propertied or inferior" (*Face of the Deep* 49). While Keller acknowledges that this "grid of dualisms" is not the necessary correlate of *creatio ex nihilo*, historically they have been closely associated. I think the point is highly debatable, but a fuller rejoinder would need to engage Keller's reading of texts on a case-by-case basis, which is not possible here. Keller does concede, however (in a footnote, alas), that efforts to "radicalize" transcendence, as we find in Kathryn Tanner's project, serve commendably to disrupt such a grid (ibid. 254–55 n. 48). I follow Tanner's lead, though she is hardly alone in her commitment to engage "classical" theological approaches in the postmodern context.

wrong kind of involvement in the world, since those who have acquired the privilege of "representation" can maintain dominance over others. A robust defense of immanence might therefore become strategic for giving expression to a God who is vulnerably involved in the material and historical processes of our world, and for destabilizing and pluralizing "from below" those power relationships that have achieved institutionally sedimented, "top-down" privilege.

Such considerations underscore just how loaded our God-talk is, which is why a central task of theology is to subject to criticism the complex and largely unnoticed ways such discourse bears ideological freight. But what is portrayed by such critics as the almost self-evident link between "transcendence" and divine "apathy" or "tyranny" reflects a fundamental misunderstanding. To put it simply, the problem is not that a greater balance between juxtaposed terms is required, or that a radicalization of immanence (as opposed to transcendence) is necessary to subvert all such "strong theologies." The problem is that all such characterizations of transcendence are insufficiently radical.

Creaturely "Distinction" within God

Commenting upon the theologies of divine transcendence in Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Dionysius, Thomas Aquinas, and Nicholas of Cusa (among others), Henri de Lubac writes that those who affirm transcendence

do not deny immanence. Indeed, they grasp the idea of transcendence sufficiently to understand that it necessarily implies immanence. If God is transcendent, then nothing is opposed to him, nothing can limit him nor be compared with him: [God] is 'wholly other', and therefore penetrates the world absolutely. *Deus interior intimo meo et superior summo meo.*"[15]

While such a statement may initially confirm suspicions that transcendence so understood implies domination (nothing can "oppose" or "compare" with God), the statement means to say that the world cannot oppose God because God is not an oppositional reality, i.e., not *a* being among beings, not *a* power among powers. To declare God as "wholly other" is to issue a denial of a thoroughgoing sort. God and world are not "one," yet neither are they "two." God and world cannot be identified, yet neither are they two beings constituted by a zero-sum relationship. They are "not-two"—noncontrastive and noncompetitive, as Tanner puts it.

Precisely because God is the incomparable and unconditioned, utterly boundless and unconstrained, God is radically near to creation in its

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[15] Henri de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, trans. Alexander Dru (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996) 94.

particularity, contingency, and texture: without measure, without opposition, and with no need for a chain of intermediaries in order to be present to or efficacious in the world. The infinite "more than" of God is fatally misunderstood if thought of according to a scale of similitude. God and creation stand in a relation of absolute, qualitative distinction—a distinction that comes to be through God's free origination. Creation implies a distinction "from" God that, because of its absolute character, remains "in" God. "The difference between God and the world," writes Karl Rahner, "is of such a nature that God establishes and is the difference of the world from himself, and for this reason he establishes the closest unity precisely in the differentiation."[16] God delivers to the world its own sphere of integrity, and yet the world wholly dwells in God who remains its (nonobjectifiable) ground. Although on our "side" of this qualitative distinction we might conventionally speak of transcendence as "beyond" the world and immanence "within" it, a more consistent way of putting the matter is that the self-bestowal of the wholly transcendent God is "the most immanent factor in the creature."[17] God is nearer to me than I am to myself, as Augustine declares.

The implications of this theological grammar should not go unnoticed: limited transcendence means limited immanence. If God is in some sense regional in relationship to creation—that is, if the distinction is not absolute but categorical—then God would only be somewhere "out there," negatively defined and limited by the world, and so able only to operate "on" or "in" or "with" the world in a conditioned manner. Such a view is characteristic of much in Hellenistic thought. Tanner summarizes:

In Greek and Roman religion and in Greek philosophy to a great extent, divinity refers to a kind of being distinct from others within the matrix of the same cosmos. Divinity characterizes that which is most powerful, self-sufficient and unchanging among beings, providing loci of intelligibility and meaning within an otherwise disordered world. 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.[18]

God and world (and entities within the world) are distinguished according to a valuational hierarchy. God is atop the Great Chain of Being, and divine actuality cascades down the scale to what is most passive, i.e., "matter." As Tanner makes clear, this formulation is contrastive and

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[16] Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978) 62.

[17] Karl Rahner, "Immanent and Transcendent Consummation of the World," *Theological Investigations* 10 (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1973) 281.

[18] Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology* 39.

spatial. We find it in Aristotle, and we find it in Middle Platonism, which formed the philosophical milieu for the debates over *creatio ex nihilo*.[19] Such a picture makes the postulation of matter's eternity entirely logical, perhaps even necessary according to its own terms.

The affirmation of God's radical transcendence unsettles this world picture. By declaring that God freely originates created reality, with no preexistent constraints against which God must contend, whether passive matter, cosmological laws, or *khoral* indeterminacies, *creatio ex nihilo* affirms God's relationship to creation as utterly gratuitous. The point has nothing to do with securing for God some tyrannical power, which human beings might co-opt. Rather, it is part of a vision of the God-world relationship that sees no "opposition" between them.

The Gift of Being a Creature

That the biblical narratives speak of God as creator is deeply significant here. Even if not immediately engaged in the kinds of questions I am considering in this more formal way, the biblical affirmation of God as creator inclines toward the view of the noneternity of matter, once the question becomes explicit. If God is not viewed as "part" of the world in any way, not even its best part, we have an understanding of God's transcendence that challenges the Hellenistic picture by articulating God's relationship to creation as unnecessary. God does not need the world, nor does God depend on the world in order to be God. Yet, God "gives" the world and elects to be intimately involved with those creatures who depend entirely on God for their very existence. "In Christian belief," writes Robert Sokolowski,

we understand the world as that which might not have been, and correlatively we understand God as capable of existing, in undiminished goodness and greatness, even if the world had not been. . . . The world and everything in it is [therefore] appreciated as a gift brought about by a generosity that has no parallel in what we experience in the world. The existence of the world now prompts our gratitude, whereas the being of the world prompts our wonder.[20]

To suggest, as Caputo does, that such a view of God is not available to experience is to miss the difference nothing makes. Sokolowski ventures to say that "the distinction between the world understood as possibly not

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[19] "Divinity [in Middle Platonism] is localized as First or Primary Being within a cosmological hierarchy and characterized in an exclusive way that sets it apart from everything else. Divinity and the rest of the world taken as a whole are viewed as logical contraries within a single spectrum; this forces an a priori separation of the two" (Ibid. 41).

[20] Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Notre Dame. Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1982) 19.

having existed and God understood as possibly being all that there is" is hardly a matter of abstraction, even if the idea can be abstractly formulated. "The distinction is lived in Christian life"—a point I will try to make clear later when discussing Jesus' resurrection.[21] But here I want to consider how the simple act of contemplative prayer can help nourish the insight that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* enshrines. Rowan Williams elaborates the point:

To say, "I exist (along with the whole of my environment) at God's will, I am unconditionally dependent upon God" means [that] . . . my existence in the world, *including* my need to imagine this as personal, active and giving, is "of God"; my search for an identity is something rooted in God's freedom, which grounds the sheer thereness of the shared world I stand in. . . . Before the literally inconceivable fact of the divine difference and the divine liberty we have no words except thanksgiving that, because God's life *is what it is*, we are. . . . The contemplation of God, which is among other things the struggle to become the kind of person who can without fear be open to the divine activity, would not be possible if God were seen as an agent exercising power over others, bending them to the divine will. Contemplative prayer classically finds its focus in the awareness of God at the centre of the praying person's being—and, simultaneously, God at the centre of the whole world's being: a solidarity in creatureliness.[22]

Williams's account of contemplative prayer entails transcendence (and so immanence) without reserve. While obviously affirming the contingency of creation—creation is "unconditionally dependent" and can be beheld in its "sheer thereness"—Williams also affirms God's radical proximity to creation. Precisely because God's transcendence is illimitable, God is at the "centre of the praying person's being" as well as at the "centre of the whole world's being." This is what the grammar of transcendence is really about and what lies at the heart of *creatio ex nihilo*.

One lesson to be drawn from this view is the following: those who might plea for a greater emphasis on immanence in order to correct some perceived imbalance will actually make a more coherent case by deepening our understanding of transcendence. The latter includes the former. It is a lesson Caputo seems to have forgotten, or chooses to ignore. To wit:

Indeed, rather than speaking of God's transcendence at all, it might be better to speak of God's in-scendence (incendiary inscendence!) or "insistence" in the world. The essence of God's transcendence lies in God's insistence. . . . I am trying to displace thinking about God as the highest and best thing there is *there* by starting to think that God is the call that *provokes* what is there, the specter that haunts what is there, the spirit that breathes over what is there.[23]

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[21] Ibid. 23.

[22] Rowan Williams, "On Being Creatures," in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 63–78, at 74–76.

[23] Caputo, *Weakness of God* 45.

Overcoming the onto-theological frame is not served by denying or limiting God's transcendence, as Caputo seems to imagine. It is served by articulating "the distinction."[24] Christian theology "needs to radicalize claims about both God's transcendence and involvement with the world," adds Tanner, "if the two are to work for rather than against one another." Caputo's position may seem radical in its incendiary insistence, but it is not radical enough.

A contrastive definition [of transcendence and agency] is not radical enough to allow a direct creative involvement of God within the world in its entirety. A contrastive definition does not work through the implications of divine transcendence to the end: a God who transcends the world must also . . . transcend the distinctions by contrast appropriate there.[25]

Power (and so Vulnerability) without Reserve

In light of the noncontrastive account of transcendence above, one can give an account of God's power (or omnipotence) in a similar fashion. Adequately understood, they are two aspects of the same grammar.

Caputo clearly intends to avoid a competitive view of God and creation.

God's transcendence is not to be taken onto-theo-logically as a *summum ens* towering over finite beings, nor is it to be taken onto-theo-politically as a sovereign master who supplies the paradigm for the human mastery over everything else. . . . I do not think of God as some super-being who out-knows, out-wills, out-does, out-powers, and out-exists every entity here below, a higher super-entity, a hyper-presence dwelling in a high world.[26]

On their face, such statements seem consistent with two basic rules Tanner formulates for speaking of divine transcendence and agency. The first, which I have already discussed, is to avoid any "univocal attribution of predicates to God and world in a simple contrast of divine and non-divine predicates."[27] If God is understood in terms of "being," so that God is, as it were, a very big being standing apart from and over all other beings, God and world will be construed as coexisting within a continuum. Such is an instance of onto-theology, and it runs roughshod over the absolute,

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[24] See David B. Burrell, C.S.C., "Creator/Creatures Relation: 'The Distinction' vs. 'Onto-theology,'" *Faith and Philosophy* 25 (2008) 177–89; and "Reply to Cross and Hasker," ibid. 205–12.

[25] Tanner, *God and Creation* 46. For other works where Tanner develops this noncontrastive view of the God-world relationship in topically specific ways, see *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001); and *Economy of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

[26] Caputo, *Weakness of God* 39.   [27] Tanner, *God and Creation* 47.

qualitative distinction between the world and God. It also produces considerable confusion in practical and theoretical matters in theologies of grace. If God and world coexist within a continuum, then divine agency is exercised at the expense of creaturely agency, and vice versa. The question of divine will and human freedom becomes an intractable problem.[28]

The second rule follows from the first: "avoid in talk about God's creative agency all suggestions of limitation in scope or manner. The second rule prescribes talk of God's creative agency as immediate and universally extensive."[29] In the same way, if transcendence and immanence should not be opposed, so must we avoid opposing divine and creaturely agency in a manner implying reciprocity or mutual exclusion. If we speak of God's agency as limited in some way, either as the result of incapacity or in direct conflict with some other agency, we can no longer consistently speak of God's unconditioned freedom. "Like that of a finite agent, God's influence will be of a limited sort: it may not extend to everything, it may presuppose what it does not produce, it may require the intervening agency of others."[30] This second rule should be embraced by one who wishes to avoid imagining God as a whimsical power who intervenes here and there, or who violently breaks in upon the world in order to subject it to some implacable design. If God is regional vis-à-vis creation, then divine agency will also be regional, with the result that creaturely agency gains its sphere of autonomy to the extent that divine agency is uninvolved. Divine power, insofar as it becomes operative in a region where it does not yet reach, will do so in a way that extends, overcomes, appropriates, or cajoles.

The point of this second rule is not to secure for God arbitrary power, but rather to show how divine creativity is not at all competitive with the world whose very existence it sustains from within. The alterity of God is wholly pacific and generative, limitlessly nurturing and empowering of contingent creation. This is how to understand the abstract idea of "omnipotence." It may be easy to confuse omnipotence with tyranny, but such an understanding "misses the true concept of omnipotence," writes Wolfhart Pannenberg. The "power of God has no precondition outside itself," no "object" against which it must strive, no "antithesis" to which it is tied. "Power" is not a univocal concept that can apply equally to God and creature. A fundamental asymmetry pertains, since God freely originates and sustains creaturely agency as such. "For this reason," continues

[28] Ibid. 81–119. See also William C. Placher's discussion of divine grace and human initiative in *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996) 88–107.
[29] Tanner, *God and Creation* 47.
[30] Ibid. 46.

Pannenberg, "the scriptures consistently related what they say about God's omnipotence to references to his creative work."[31]

A Theopoetics without Reserve

This last statement is crucial. Christian discourse cannot properly speak of divine power in abstraction from a set of stories that account for God as creator, as redeemer, and as the One who "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist." This expression from Paul's letter to the Romans (4:17)[32] finds so many echoes throughout the New Testament that Richard Bauckham has declared it "close to being a definition of God."[33] "God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power" (1 Cor 6:14); "the power of God, who raised him from the dead" (Col 2:20); "who raises the dead" (2 Cor 1:9); "who raised the Lord Jesus [and who] will raise us also with Jesus" (2 Cor 4:14); "[Christ] was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead" (Rom 1:4; see also Rom 4:24, 8:11, 10:9; Eph 1:20; Col 2:12; 1 Pet 1:21). There is an intimate relationship in these (and other) passages between God's character, God's power, and Jesus' resurrection. Here is a narrative intervention in an otherwise abstract discourse that gives our discourse a determinative theological shape. And here is a theopoetics without reserve; for rather than denying power to God, which the cross of Jesus disassociated from the resurrection might imply, it reframes and reformulates power by revealing its true vocation in the gratuitous offer of reconciled life, even (and especially) when life has succumbed to violence and unjust death.

I say "theopoetics without reserve" with obvious reference to Caputo's project, for it is here where, after providing a brilliantly suggestive reading of the cross, it stops short of giving an equally suggestive account of how Jesus' resurrection from the dead might creatively reconstruct and rehabilitate the language of power. One cannot but admire Caputo's cross-centered deconstruction:

The power of God is not pagan violence, brute power, or vulgar magic; it is the power of powerlessness, the power of the call, the power of protest that rises up from innocent suffering and calls out against it, the power that says *no* to unjust suffering, and finally, the power to suffer-with (*sym-pathos*) innocence, which is perhaps the central Christian symbol.[34]

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[31] Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols., trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988) 1:416.

[32] For biblical translations I use the Revised Standard Version throughout.

[33] Richard Bauckham, "God Who Raises the Dead: The Resurrection of Jesus and Early Christian Faith in God," in *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ*, ed. Paul Avis (London: Darton, Longman, & Todd, 1993) 136–54, at 136.

[34] Caputo, *Weakness of God* 43.

This "power of powerlessness," so quintessentially Pauline, would seem a creatively subversive way to think of God's activity in the world. It lunges toward an incisive understanding of how divine creativity is not reciprocal to the false powers of the world, but a power that is true because it is good, a power that is unlimited because it freely gives itself away and distributes itself so as to reconstitute others in reconciled relation. It seems on the verge of giving a rich account of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, in fact, as the "new creation" that shows how powerlessness so transfigured might provide us a vocabulary for talking about the redemption of "the powers and principalities," even their "participation" in divine life. But this Caputo cannot do. God's "weakness" is not the result of divine freedom. It is an incapacity.

Distancing himself from Paul's presumption of God's unconditional agency (and therefore from Paul's reading of the cross in light of the resurrection), Caputo offers a "more radical conception of the weakness of God, of the weak force of God," one that denies God's ability to "causatively" act at all. "God is an event, not in the order of power or being, but in the order of the good."[35] Caputo rejects (not naïvely) the second of Tanner's two rules. He does not view divine agency "as immediate and universally extensive," but as a "summons" (a "call," "event," or "lure") that disallows any analogical predication of power to God. "The name of God is the name of an unconditional promise, not of an unlimited power. A promise made without an army to enforce it, without the sovereign power to coerce it. *That* is what I am calling the weak force of God. That force is the power of powerlessness."[36] If such a statement is motivated by concerns with human appropriation and questions of theodicy, we need to pause here to consider the implications of systematically disassociating the "order of power/being" from the "order of the good" in this way. I will discuss two.

Specters of Modernity

The first relates to "the distinction" of divine and creaturely freedom previously discussed. If Caputo wishes to say that the only way to affirm divine goodness is by denying God's power to act—otherwise we must impute all evil to God, since God could and should prevent it—we might rightly ask whether we can affirm God's goodness if God cannot act. If God is unable to act in the way Caputo suggests, what warrant do we have for declaring God good? How could we distinguish goodness from mere passivity? To be good surely presupposes freedom, and yet it seems difficult to say how God is in any meaningful sense free under Caputo's terms. God might be free *from* the causal mechanisms of the world, but it seems God is

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[35] Ibid. 53.   [36] Ibid. 90.

not free *for* involvement in the world. Divine freedom is negatively defined by creaturely agency. To declare God "weak" in a way that presumes limitation to divine freedom is to accept the terms of an onto-theological picture while struggling to avoid them.

As numerous commentators have observed, this apparent dilemma has a distinctively modern pedigree.[37] To situate divine power and creaturely agency in a scenario of contrast is to collapse "the distinction." It renders divine activity interventionist when in fact divine and creaturely agency are directly (not inversely) proportional. "There is not an independent causal continuum in which it is puzzling how God could intervene," writes William Placher. "The only causal continuum is one whose every event God sustains. Divine action is not an interruption in or a violation of the normal course of things, but precisely *is* the normal course of things."[38] This is so, not because the course of things follows some predetermined script, but because God positively and continuously "gives" the distinction that makes creaturely becoming possible. To appeal to the distinction between divine and human efficacy in terms of primary and secondary causality, which Placher does, is to affirm that God is continuously involved in the dynamic unfolding of creation as its animating source and ground. Creation has no independent existence. It is given *ex nihilo* by the creator God who positively wills its very existence. The openness and autonomy of creation in its dynamic becoming is not contrastive with divine efficacy but is the very gift of that efficacy. *Creatio ex nihilo* explicitly affirms the contingency and open-ended "play" of creation. Creation is not self-constituting. It possesses no fixed essences. It is "a reality suspended

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[37] William Placher characterizes the modern "domestication of transcendence," which took root in the 17th century, in three ways: "1. Many theologians came to think of God as one of the entities or agents in the world among the others, and of God's properties as differing from those of created things in degree rather than in kind. . . . 2. The effort to make God, and God's agency, comprehensible also leads to thinking about the relation of God to human freedom and responsibility as a zero-sum. . . . 3. Theologians who think of God as one thing in the world alongside others often then try to preserve some sense of divine transcendence by emphasizing that God is the most distant, most powerful thing in the world, at the peak of all the world's hierarchies of being and value. This often makes God the *enemy of transformative justice*, since God's place at the peak of hierarchies gives divine sanction to those hierarchies, and a God defined in terms of distance, power, and unaffectability gives such qualities the imprimatur of divinity" (*Domestication of Transcendence* 181–82). Placher's study, which bears reading alongside those of several others who provide comparable assessments (e.g., Charles Taylor, Louis Dupré, Stephen Toulmin, John Milbank, Hans Frei, and Michael J. Buckley) concludes by arguing that many of the revisionist proposals in contemporary theology, including process theology, deconstruction, and functionalism, end up accepting the terms of modernity in their attempt to overcome them (183).

[38] Placher, *Domestication of Transcendence* 190.

between nothing and infinity," composed of "relational differences and ceaseless alternations," as John Milbank puts it. Creation from nothing actually gives priority to "becoming and unexpected emergence."[39]

We can say that this "play" of creation is uniquely intensified in the contingent freedom of human beings, though it is no less true to say that such freedom remains utterly dependent upon the transcendent God who gives and immanently sustains human freedom as its empowering ground. Divine agency and human agency are not "one," yet neither are they "two." As Rahner explains:

This very difference is established by God himself, and hence something which is autonomous and which alone realizes this radical difference between God and creatures entails no limitation of God's sovereignty. For this difference is not something which happens to him, but rather he alone makes it possible. He establishes it, he allows it, he grants it the freedom of its own self-actualization of this differentiation.[40]

Such a view is obviously in keeping with the Thomistic distinction between primary and secondary causality, but it is hardly exclusive to Thomas. As Placher and Tanner have both shown, it is just this distinction that is regularly presupposed in the so-called "classical" theological tradition, a tradition inaccurately characterized by certain theological revisionists who, rightly working for alternatives to the modern problematizations of human and divine agency, tend to project those problems back onto most premodern approaches. Such anachronistic projections are evident in Caputo's imputation to classical theologies of *creatio ex nihilo* what in fact are modern problematizations of "power," "causality," and "transcendence."

Narratives of a Vulnerable God

The second implication of unhinging the order of being/power from the order of the good is that it tends to leave "power" outside the possibility of redemption. Because Caputo frames power in terms of appropriation, domination, and tyranny, he must drive a distinction between power and goodness so deep that one wonders what positive relationship they could possibly have. If Caputo wishes to help us understand how goodness might

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[39] John Milbank, "Postmodern Critical Augustinianism: A Short *Summa* in Forty-two Responses to Unasked Questions," in *The Postmodern God: A Theological Reader*, ed. Graham Ward (London: Blackwell, 1997) 265–78, at 267. As Milbank points out, much depends on how we characterize such relational differences. That they can be (and usually are) a mixture of agonism and peace, violence and harmony, in our contingent history is undeniable. But whether we regard one or the other as "ontological" (or anterior to creation) makes a very appreciable difference. Such is at stake in *creatio ex nihilo*, as I will later explain.

[40] Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* 105.

itself be a kind of power— though one very different from "the principalities and powers" of this world—the effort is bedeviled by his near total identification of "power" with "violence." This is a great loss, rhetorically and theologically, because it threatens to abandon those very principalities and powers to a realm of ontological violence, when in fact Paul understands them to be created by God as *originally* good, as *presently* in a state exhibiting sinfulness, and open to a redeemed *future*.[41] We need not think of these narrative moments in crudely sequential terms, of course, but we must attempt to appreciate how Paul's theology of power, both human and divine, presupposes a broader narrative context whose theology of the cross is triangulated by a vision of original and eschatological peace. A more convincing and rehabilitative theological vision of power is one that affirms this fuller narrative context.

In his *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, Placher considers how the Gospels reveal a God whose "strange power" is fundamentally at odds with "power based on fear, power seeking domination, power always edging toward violence."[42] To say "at odds" is not to say reciprocal or retaliatory. God's power is not that sort at all. God's power has nothing to do with the splendid security of a cosmic monarch, but freely gives itself away as the expression of its very essence. What this means is that power based on fear, domination, and violence is not "real" power at all. It *is* real insofar as its destructiveness is concretely materialized in human relationships, but it is in fact an idolatrous commandeering of true power. Because of the overwhelming pervasiveness of such idolatry, it may be tempting to abandon the language of power altogether when speaking of God. But the temptation must be resisted. It would amount to a tacit acceptance that power as such is congenitally (and so irredeemably) dominating and quick to violence. To accept this view is to accept an upside down world as right side up. As Placher further points out, renouncing a constructive theology of power makes it difficult to speak of God as creator, sustainer, and redeemer. It immediately renders much of Scripture senseless, or worse. (The catena of scriptural passages above would be among the first to drop on the demythologist's cutting floor.) It also raises questions of an ethical sort, since, despite Caputo's obvious intentions, it can lead to a fatalism that absconds from political engagement.[43]

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[41] For more on this threefold narrative pattern in Paul's theology of "the powers," see John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994) 134–61; Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1962); Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998).

[42] William Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God: Christ, Theology, and Scripture* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994) 17.

[43] Ibid.

Despite the many challenges and ambiguities it faces, positive Christian talk about power needs to reclaim its true vocation; and it can do no better in this rehabilitative task than by radicalizing it. In just the same way that transcendence is not opposed to immanence (as discussed above), so too is divine power in no way opposed to vulnerability. The unconditioned character of divine creativity subverts the binary contrasts of "strong" and "weak." Divine vulnerability is vulnerability without reserve, because divine power is not oppositionally structured or rivalrous with the world. God's omnipotence, as understood in Christian theological terms, is very different from what abstract considerations are likely to yield. As Karl Barth reminds us, God's "plenitude of power . . . can assume the form of weakness and impotence and so as omnipotence."[44] In light of Barth's considerations, Placher writes:

God's power is the power of love, which does not seek to dominate . . . but acts consistently in love which authentically concerns itself for others. . . . For in freely loving, God is most of all who God is, most exemplifying the kind of power God has. When power means, as so often in human affairs it does, the uneasy quest for domination, then to be moved by another, wounded by another's pain, is experienced as a form of powerlessness, and love is trapped between inaction and the risk of impotence. But the strange power of God reveals such quests for power as a kind of weakness. . . . Vulnerability . . . is a perfection of loving freedom.[45]

THE RESURRECTION IN RETROSPECT

So far we have considered objections to *creatio ex nihilo* at a formal level of reflection. In order to meet the criticism that this doctrine makes God out to be some sort of cosmic tyrant whose activity in the world is interventionist and capricious, I have tried to show how the doctrine in fact articulates the God-world relationship according to "the distinction," which, rather than resulting in a univocal (and onto-theological) configuration of "transcendence" and "power," requires that we elaborate such terms in a noncompetitive and noncontrastive manner. Only when *creatio ex nihilo* is so understood does it gain its enduring and wide-ranging significance in theological discourse. So understood, *creatio ex nihilo* affirms that creation is wholly gratuitous, freely originated by the creator God upon whom it depends for its integrity, and so with whom it does not struggle for self-actualization. Far from being a source of top-down oppression or in-built manipulation, the recognition of our utter dependence on such gratuity "is the most liberating affirmation we could ever hear," declares Williams.

[44] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, trans. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956) 186–87.
[45] Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God* 19.

With God alone, I am dealing with what does not need to construct or negotiate an identity, what is free to be itself without the process of struggle. . . . God does not and cannot lay claim upon me so as to "become" God; what I am cannot be made functional for God's being; I can never be defined by the job of meeting God's needs.[46]

The striking consequence of this appraisal is that when we understand such divine gratuity as *true* power—that is, when we allow our discourse of power to be theologically shaped according to "the distinction" in this way—we are poised to see that "all other powers need to be unmasked or demythologized. The creator's power-as-resource cannot be invoked to legitimize earthly power."[47]

Here is the inner relationship between contemplative awareness and prophetic critique: by becoming attitudinally hospitable to the gratuity of our creaturely origination, and so to our primordial and continual dependence upon a God whose gift of creation comes *ex nihilo*—without any need, constraint, inner agitation, or ulterior motive to "expand" divine being—we contemplatively enter upon an infinitely pacific otherness who alone accepts us whole in the nakedness of our being. We also become witness to and transformed by a "power" that stands as the ultimate index for critiquing every created power.

True power—let us not be afraid of this word—is pacific, self-communicating, and empowering of others; and it is just this power in which we are invited to participate. Such an invitation means, as Sokowloski was quoted above as saying, that the distinction can be lived in Christian life. With this insight we may now transition from formal to more narratival and practical considerations.

Earlier in this article I claimed that rather than representing an alien imposition of metaphysics upon the biblical stories of creation, *creatio ex nihilo* is consistent with and illuminating of them. Even if the second to third century debates over the eternity of matter are the proximate reason for its technical formulation, *creatio ex nihilo* makes explicit in that particular context what a biblical vision of divine creativity and freedom already implies. We can fully acknowledge that there is development in the biblical tradition, and in fact I wish now to trace one of its principal threads. As I wish to make clear, Jesus' resurrection from the dead is, for Christians, the eschatological promise God makes to creation, a concretely efficacious promise, insofar as it entails the transformation of Jesus' entire creaturely reality (this is what "bodily" resurrection explicitly means). From the perspective of the Easter event—an event that reveals a God who calls unto eschatological life what has succumbed to the nonbeing and nondoing of death—Christian reflection could come to envision the whole of creation in

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[46] Williams, "On Being Creatures" 72.
[47] Ibid. 72–73.

terms of pure summons. *Creatio ex nihilo* arises not from fruitless specula-
tion about the first instant of creation but is an affirmation about how God
continuously relates to creation, namely, through the pacific and reconcil-
ing freedom of God's very self. It reveals that divine power is not in
interminable struggle with creation. Indeed, if there is a demythologization
at work here, it is found in the discovery that God has nothing to do with
violence or necessity. God's relationship to creation is one of original (and
eschatological) peace.

Logic and Discovery

Scripture does not explicitly engage the question of "Being/beings" that
informs the above discussion of onto-theology. "Incontestably," writes
Jean-Luc Marion, "biblical revelation is unaware of ontological difference,
the science of Being/beings as such, and hence of the question of Being.
But," Marion contends, "nothing is less accurate than to pretend that it
does not speak a word on being, nonbeing, and beingness."[48]

One text Marion appeals to is Romans 4:17, where Paul speaks of Abra-
ham's faith and in the same breath speaks of the resurrection of the dead.
Just as God calls Abraham (and thus Israel) to faith and covenant—the
"call" here is utterly uncalled for, based upon no necessity whatsoever—so
is the resurrection from the dead a "call" that brings to life what was not.
Nothing compels God to issue this promise, or even to act upon it once
made; and nothing prevents God from bringing the promise into fruition,
neither Israel's exile nor the nonbeing of death. The logic is unmistakable:
"Abraham is our father in the eyes of God, in whom he puts his faith,
and who brings the dead to life and calls into existence what does not yet
exist." Marion takes this to mean that faith in the living God cannot be
circumscribed within "Being/being." The advent of the call to Abraham,
like the call of the dead to life, is one that "crosses being." To say that God
is "without being" is to say that God *gives* being. God gives "the distinc-
tion." "Being" comes from nothing—nothing other than God who
"delivers" it and "puts it into play."[49]

Picking up a similar line of reflection, Rowan Williams maintains that
the theology of *creatio ex nihilo* finds decisive historic and narrative roots
in the event of Israel's return from exile, especially the "second exodus" of
the Babylonian exile. We see particularly in Second Isaiah a vision of
restoration as the renewal of creation, a second creation that permits a
new understanding of creation as a whole. "Out of a situation where there
is no identity, where there are no names, only the anonymity of slavery or

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[48] Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson
(Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991) 86.
[49] Ibid. 101.

the powerlessness of the ghetto, God makes a human community, calls it *by name* (a recurrent motif in Is. 40-55), gives it or restores to it a territory. Nothing makes God do this except God's own free promise; from human chaos God makes human community."[50] In the gratuity of God's call, what was "not" now "is." No suppression of chaos, nor any sort of battle with recalcitrant materials is involved. It is "seen as performed by the free utterance of God alone." The point has nothing to do with dramatizing divine power over against something. Indeed, creation is not about "power" (agonistically framed) at all. "Prior to God's word, there is nothing to impose *on*." Of course, this understanding of God's gratuitous summons may not lead inexorably to *creatio ex nihilo*, at least as we find the doctrine in the second to third centuries; but, argues Williams, it is a "short step to the conclusion that God's relation to the whole world is like this: not a struggle with pre-existing disorder that is then moulded into shape, but a pure summons."[51]

Caputo was earlier quoted as saying that nothing within biblical or human experience could be said to underwrite the theology of divine omnipotence and *creatio ex nihilo*, but here we see how the gratuity of God's call, as well as the narratives of exodus and covenant, provide the historical and narratival resources for just such an understanding. We know from biblical scholarship that the stories of creation were composed subsequent to the events of exodus and covenant, and that only from the point of view of Israel's historic liberation and lived fidelity/infidelity does there emerge a theology of God as creator of the universe. The stories of creation themselves reflect the grammar of exodus and covenant. If, as Williams claims, there is only a "short step" to the conclusion that God's relationship to the whole of creation is one of pure summons, we can also appreciate that such a step was not taken all at once. David Burrell makes this point when he writes that the Israelites' "preoccupations with the God who calls forth and so redeems a people only slowly gave way to the more cosmic implications of that fact." The theology of creation may be said to exhibit an ongoing process of discovery that radiates from the experience of exodus and covenantal relationship. "Yet when such reflections took place," Burrell adds, "there was no hesitation to affirm this One as both sovereign and free. And the reasons for insisting that this be the case with the creator would plausibly stem from what the experience of redemption had taught them."[52]

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[50] Williams, "On Being Creatures" 67–68

[51] Ibid. 68.

[52] David B. Burrell, C.S.C., *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1993) 27. Burrell makes clear that the Genesis accounts do not affirm *creatio ex nihilo* in any strict sense, though he argues that such is a legitimate development of those accounts (16)—a development that was undertaken by all three Abrahamic faiths. These "respective communities

To better understand this retrospective movement from soteriology to a reflexive theology of creation, we can usefully make a distinction. On the one hand there is the *logic* of creation from nothing that can be described in formal terms, while on the other there is the process of its *discovery* that arises from lived experience and reflection.[53] If *creatio ex nihilo* reflects a particular logic about the God-world relationship that can be stated in technical language, especially when induced to do so by a particular philosophical and theological dispute, it need not be thought of as divorced from the concrete circumstances that nourish the insight "from below." Of course, it is possible at some later time to declare that *creatio ex nihilo* has always been the biblical view of creation, though such an assessment is clearly mistaken. But it is no less mistaken to ignore those trends in Scripture that evidence a process of discovery about the God-world relationship that makes those formal terms eminently coherent. This becomes especially clear in the theology of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Narratives *in Excess*: Protology and Eschatology Embrace

The belief in the resurrection of the dead is a relative latecomer in Jewish theology. Only in postexilic times do we begin to see its flowering. We can trace the metaphorical elements of resurrection language taking shape in Isaiah, Hosea, Ezekiel, and Zechariah, but only in Daniel (12:2) will we find an unambiguous instance in the canonical Old Testament that affirms (in a metonymical way) personal resurrection from the dead.[54] Intertestamental literature produces more examples, including the memorable scene depicted in 2 Maccabees in which the Jewish martyrs of Antiochus IV are said to await the justice of the general resurrection. What is significant about this example is that it intimately unites resurrection with creation. "I do not know how you came into being in my womb," says the mother to her seven slain sons in the presence of their oppressor. "It was not I who gave you life and breath, nor I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of humankind and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake

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came to realize that the divine action portrayed narratively must nonetheless be understood as that of causing the very being of things and indeed of all that is. This is what we mean by *creatio ex nihilo*, which intends to state that nothing at all is presupposed to his activity of creating" (25).

[53] I am indebted to James Alison for this distinction as it relates to the resurrection. See his *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad, 1998) 100–102.

[54] For this shift from metaphor to metonym in the evolution of resurrection language and belief, see N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, vol. 3, *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 129–205.

of his laws" (2 Macc 7:23). The hoped-for resurrection of the dead, which was by the second century BCE a fairly widespread (though not universal) belief among Jews, is directly connected with God's covenantal faithfulness to creation. It therefore bears upon the very character of Israel's God. It enunciates a vision that telescopes eschatology and protology. Resurrection is the (future) fulfillment of creation's (original) vocation, and the deliverance of creation from (present) domination and (the ongoing threat of) annihilation.

This narrative telescoping is especially characteristic of the New Testament, not least when the Gospel of John speaks of Jesus as "the resurrection and the life" (11:25-26) and the Logos-made-flesh as the generative principle of creation: "All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (1:3). Paul too describes Christ simultaneously as the "first born from the dead" and the one "through whom all things come into being" (Col 1:15-18). Christ's resurrection for Paul is not just God's restoration of creation in the midst of its destruction; it signals the future fulfillment of creation when God will be all in all (Col 1:28). What is particularly relevant for my purposes here is not to declare, as Pannenberg justifiably does, that Paul's theology here and elsewhere provides sufficient scriptural warrant for a theology that affirms *creatio ex nihilo* and divine omnipotence.[55] My interest is what the resurrection reveals about divine creativity. What insight might this central affirmation of the New Testament provide as related to the character of divine "power," and might such insight be key to the meaning of *creatio ex nihilo*?

If anything might be summarily said of God raising Jesus from the dead, it could profitably be described as exhibiting a "logic of excess." The character of the Easter event as presented in the New Testament is strikingly consistent with the whole of Jesus' ministry, which, as Paul Ricoeur reports, "clashes head on with the logic of equivalence that orders our everyday exchanges, our commerce, and our penal law."[56] Jesus' hospitality to those outside centers of power and privilege, his ministry of forgiveness to sinners, his consistent renunciation of violence, his parables disclosing a God whose surprising otherness subverts all earthly claims to domestication and manipulation: these defining features of Jesus' ministry are validated and dramatically reexpressed by the event of Easter, but in a way that now seeks to reestablish communion, through forgiveness, with those who violently expelled Jesus and his kingdom ministry from their midst. The dynamics of Easter grace is excess upon excess (a "logic of

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[55] Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* 1:417.
[56] Paul Ricoeur, "The Logic of Jesus, the Logic of God," in *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, trans. David Pellauer, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 281–82.

generosity" or "superabundance," as Ricoeur alternatively calls it) because it reveals a power unconditioned by reciprocity and violence.

The resurrection is not an overpowering event in any sense. Though it is God's vindication of an innocent man whose violent expulsion typifies the "will to power"—and to be sure, the resurrection is God's eschatological "verdict" upon the mechanisms that led to Jesus' crucifixion—God's response is not retaliatory.[57] Neither is it described in the New Testament as involving displays of bombast. Indeed, the resurrection of Jesus is never (objectively) narrated; only the interpersonal encounters of the risen Christ, who imparts *shalom*, forgiveness, hope, and the possibility of a reconciled community, are narrated. Consider the stereotypical speeches of Peter in Acts: "Peter said to [those who crucified Jesus], 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you . . . and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him" (2:38-39). "The God of our ancestors raised up Jesus, whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins" (5:30-31). In the crucifixion we have murdered the "author of life" (3:15). Yet this author returns to us precisely in the midst of our violence to offer us a life of reconciliation.

By raising Jesus from the dead God is revealed as that wholly Other whose creativity is not hemmed in by the nonbeing and nondoing of death. Jesus risen is God's creativity "out of nothing," and so a power that is not negatively structured by anything at all. God's power is revealed as pardoning, self-communicative, and subversively in excess to the self-defensive and self-aggrandizing mechanisms that threaten and destroy creation. Here more than anywhere else we see the demythologization of false power at work. James Alison explains:

Jesus' resurrection is not revealed as an eschatological revenge, but as an eschatological pardon. It happens not to confound the persecutors, but to bring about a reconciliation. . . . This permits the definitive demythologization of God. God, completely outside of human reciprocity, is the human victim. . . . Thus, far from creation having anything to do with the establishment of an order, what is revealed is that the gratuitous self-giving of the victim is identical with, and the heretofore hidden center and culmination of, the gratuitous giving that is the creation.[58]

Drawing on the work of René Girard, Alison describes the resurrection as the demythologization of God because it reveals definitively that

[57] See Rowan William's insightful discussion of "the judgment of judgment" in his *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (Harrisburg, Pa.: Morehouse, 1994) 7–28.

[58] Alison, *Joy of Being Wrong* 98. See also Alison's similar treatment in *Raising Abel: The Recovery of the Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1996).

God has nothing to do with violent power. God is not a rival to creation, and neither does God form any "sacred" foundation for the sort of scapegoating mechanisms that Jesus' death so graphically displays. God's response to such violence reveals true power, which is reconciling and self-donative. God's creativity is "purely gratuitous giving, without motive, with no second intentions, with no desire for control or domination, but rather a gratuity which permits creatures to share gratuitously in the life of the Creator. The relation of gratuity is anterior to what is and has ever been."[59]

Notice the shift in this last sentence: the gratuity of God's relationship to creation as revealed by the resurrection is not ad hoc, some kind of "after thought," but primordially generative of creation—original peace. The peace imparted in the encounters with the risen Christ has nothing to do with the temporary armistice that the suppression of conflict might afford; it is "the primordial peace of the Creator from the beginning."[60] *Shalom* is anterior to creation. The creaturely "distinction" from God has nothing to do with necessity, or some rupture from undifferentiated unity we forever mourn and desperately seek to recapture. The difference of creation from God—this is the difference nothing makes—is imparted pacifically and generously.

The Johannine and Pauline theologies of creation "in Christ" make just this conjoining of eschatology and protology explicit. The Prologue of John's Gospel, which, as James D. G. Dunn notes, reflects the "backward extension of the Son of God language—from resurrection . . . to a timeless eternity," articulates a vision of origins that recasts the Genesis account within a post-Easter imagination.[61] "Everything was made through [the Logos], and without it nothing was made" (Jn 1:3). And, again, in Colossians we see a reframing of creation that looks back (in retrospect) through the resurrection: "He is the beginning, the first born of the dead" (1:18). Eschatology and protology here embrace "in Christ," and in this embrace we reach the critical threshold that would be determinative for the affirmation of *creatio ex nihilo* in the patristic period.

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[59] Alison, *Joy of Being Wrong* 98–99. Similarly, Williams: "The creative life, death and resurrection of Jesus manifests a creator who works in, not against, our limits, our mortality: the creator who, as the one who call being forth from nothing, gives without dominating" ("On Being Creatures" 76).

[60] Alison, *Joy of Being Wrong* 190.

[61] James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 256. Raymond Brown also gives an account of this retrospective movement in Johannine Christology in his *Introduction to New Testament Christology* (New York: Paulist, 1994) 133–52.

CREATION IN CHRIST: THE PATRISTIC ELUCIDATON

The wisdom Christologies in the Johannine and Pauline literature indicate a theological trajectory that proved crucial for the future of Christian theology.[62] By assimilating the theology of creation within a theology of the Word, so that creation comes to be "in" or "through" Christ, there emerged a shift from a "temporal sense of beginning" toward an "atemporal sense of origin."[63] That is, rather than speaking of God bringing life from prior formlessness (Gen 1), wisdom Christology of this variety accounts for creation as originating from God's preexistent Word, and so as pure summons (John 1). Here there is no temporal "before," no immemorial scene from which creation comes to be, only the gratuitous and pacific summons of the creator God who calls forth the scene as such. These modes of accounting for creation (temporal and atemporal) are not mutually exclusive in the New Testament. Indeed, they are intermixed. But it is clear, according to Ricoeur, that the temporal sense of beginning becomes, in these wisdom Christologies, "virtually subordinated" to the atemporal sense of origin.[64]

The significance of this trend for *creatio ex nihilo* is immediately evident, particularly when we observe that the second and third centuries brought to reflection a question not explicitly posed in most biblical accounts of creation, namely, whether the world (or "matter") is eternal.[65] In the encounter with Greek philosophers "who were tenacious advocates of the eternity of the world," patristic theologians quickly and almost unanimously declared the contrary position. They did so because, among other reasons, the thesis of the eternity of the world "seemed to imply the self-sufficiency of the world."[66] By arguing that the world had not always been, that it derives wholly from the freedom of God upon whom it continually depends, patristic theologians were elaborating a biblical theology of creation while extending the trajectory we find in the wisdom Christologies. Without such continuity it is hard to imagine how *creatio ex nihilo* could become "with astonishing speed the self-evident premise of Christian talk of the creation," as Gerhard May has shown in his detailed historical study.[67]

May credits Theophilus of Antioch and Irenaeus of Lyons with providing the classic formulation. Although Tatian was probably the first Christian theologian to explicitly declare in Greek philosophical terms that God created matter (probably in confrontation with Marcionites in Rome),

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[62] Paul Ricoeur, "Thinking Creation," in André LaCocque and Paul Ricoeur, *Thinking Biblically: Exegetical and Hermeneutical Studies*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998) 31–70, at 62.

[63] Ibid. 63.   [64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid. 34.   [66] Ibid. 63.
[67] May, *Creatio ex nihilo* 177–78.

Theophilus was the first to state more fulsomely what *creatio ex nihilo* meant in light of the Greek philosophical axiom Latinized as "Ex nihilo nihil fit."[68] As May explains, in Theophilus we see

the decisive distinction fully grasped and declared between the biblical God creating in omnipotent freedom and the platonic demiurge who is restricted in his creative activity by the precondition of matter and its possibilities. Now with the thesis of *creatio ex nihilo* and the corresponding positive statement that the free decision of God's will is the sole ground of creation, the biblical idea of free creation is properly formulated and validated within the ambit of philosophical thought.[69]

This move is hardly arbitrary. If the postulation of the world's eternity was a proximate reason for its explicit formulation, *creatio ex nihilo* in fact gives expression to the biblical emphasis on God's unconditioned freedom and involvement in the world; it exhibits coherence with a view of God "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom 4:17); and it accords with the vision of creation as having its gratuitous, atemporal origin through God's generative Word. Alas, it is difficult to imagine how patristic theology could have finally arrived at a different conclusion.

May summarizes the emergence of *ex nihilo* theology as a dialectical achievement: it "breaks through principles of philosophical metaphysics" while articulating itself "within the latter's frame of reference and by using its terms."[70] This is a crucial (if subtle) point, for it is here where critics of *creatio ex nihilo* might point to its acceptance in Christian theology as the capitulation to an onto-theological frame, when in fact it subverts that frame from within. In the encounter with a world picture that casts God and creation in a zero-sum relation (the demiurge "is restricted in his creative activity by the precondition of matter and its possibilities"), the patristic theological response was to account for creation as freely originated by God, and thus to characterize the relationship between God and creation in a noncontrastive, noncompetitive way. If it is true that patristic theologians tended to read those scriptural accounts of creation that presume a temporal beginning as though they were speaking of atemporal origin—and so, indeed, there is an interpretive overdetermination at work in the apologetic effort—we should understand that such "concurrence" (Ricoeur) of temporal beginning with atemporal origin in patristic exegesis actually corresponds with identifiable interpretive trajectories in Scripture itself.

But there is another fundamental reason for the emergence of *creatio ex nihilo* in patristic theology; and this brings me to the problem of evil. Both Theophilus and Irenaeus also spoke of God's free origination of creation in

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[68] Ibid. 163.
[70] Ibid. xii.

[69] Ibid. 161.

response to the cosmogonic speculations from various "gnostic" groups
that located the principle of evil in matter. The Valentinians, for example,
affirmed that matter had come into being, not as the result of a "sovereign
divine act," but as "a byproduct of the fall of Sophia"—Sophia being the
last and furthest removed of God's emanations. What troubled Irenaeus
about this picture of world formation was that it presumed an original
violence (or a primordial "mistake" or "ignorance") whose overcoming
among human beings requires a separative movement from material
creation.[71] For Irenaeus, whose idiomatically biblical theology exhibits
little interest in freestanding philosophical speculation, creation is wholly
contingent, a gift of God's free will, and originally good. Evil is not in any
way anterior to, but parasitical upon, creation. To borrow an illuminating
typology from Ricoeur, Irenaeus's is not a "tragic vision" that characterizes
the human being as struggling interminably within the agon of life; nor is it
one that views the (immaterial) soul as "exiled" in a material realm that
must be surmounted through spiritual technique or salvific gnosis; rather, it
is an "eschatological vision" in which the whole created order, although
presently subject to evil, suffering, and the threat of annihilation, looks to a
reconciled and transformed future in Christ.[72] It is possible to maintain this
eschatological vision without explicitly declaring *creatio ex nihilo*, but it is
essential to see that the latter's articulation exhibits just such a vision and is
motivated to safeguard it. What most stimulates its formulation is the
affirmation of creation's original goodness—a goodness that is not an ema-
nation of the One or the Good, but a free gift.[73] The point is hardly a

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[71] Ibid. 111. Something similar must be said of the Christian gnostic Basilides
who, in the middle of the second century, formulated his view of *creatio ex nihilo* by
"knitting together . . . common Christian and gnostic motifs" (84). While both
Caputo and Keller point to May's examination of Basilides as evidence that gnostic
tendencies are at root in *creatio ex nihilo*—Basilides precedes Tatian by a few
decades—May himself argues that Basilides' formulation, which appears to have
had no influence on Tatian, Theophilus, or Irenaeus, actually departs from usual
gnostic views by declaring God the sole creator (83, 179–80). Moreover, whereas
Tatian, Theophilus, and Irenaeus affirmed God's intimate involvement in history as
a key corollary to *creatio ex nihilo*, Basilides limited God's role to a single, utterly
remote act of creating the "world-seed" (180). Basilides's God is utterly distant
from and uninvolved with creation. This is what May means when he says that "the
biblical ideas of creation and omnipotence are overstated in Basilides in a gnostic
way" (84).

[72] Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston:
Beacon, 1967) 211–305. Also relevant is Ricoeur's discussion of the critical muta-
tions decipherable in the biblical appropriation of Mesopotamian creation myths,
particularly as what relates to "chaos" (175–210). Evil is not a "necessary" feature
of world order, which is "good from the first," but a scandalous rupture of that
goodness that is historical (not cosmogonic) in character (203).

[73] May, *Creatio ex nihilo* 176.

matter of empty conjecture. Irenaeus's unpacking of *creatio ex nihilo* in fact reflects his soteriological interests. Only within the context of the economy of salvation—covenant, incarnation, and resurrection—does the reflexive theology of "origins" gain its true significance.[74] To say that creation comes from nothing is, for Irenaeus, effectively to say that the whole of creation is freely originated from divine goodness and summoned to take part in present and future salvation; and that despite (and even in the midst of) the groaning that characterizes creation's travail, there remains a future that will bring creation into its fullest fruition.[75]

CONCLUSION: HOPE FOR CREATION

In conclusion I wish to emphasize that *creatio ex nihilo* is best thought of as a doctrine of hope for creation, not a doctrine that provides an explanation for the world. It is a soteriologically motivated doctrine that declares the penultimacy of evil, sin, and innocent suffering: because they do not have the "final" word—this is its "eschatological vision"—neither are they "original" or anterior to creation. Such an affirmation does not deny their present reality, only their ontological ultimacy. It therefore refuses to say that "time and the turmoil are aboriginal, like God, . . . as the ineradicable resistance, indeterminacy, and chance in things with which God must cope." It refuses to characterize God as one who "can do only so much with the raw materials with which he works, that the potter is limited by the clay, that creation is a certain roll of the dice," and so on[76]—statements that, however "poetic," actually do more to explain evil and suffering than does the position advanced here.

While I certainly disagree with the premise that God's unconditioned freedom and agency make God responsible for the evil and innocent suffering in the world—a premise that does not take sufficiently into account the qualitative distinction between divine and creaturely freedom outlined above—I fully recognize that such a position stands squarely in the midst of a mystery that is not made less so by this distinction. To say, as does Placher, that "there is not a single point where God is absent or inactive or only partly active or restricted in action, *and* that there are irrational events that are somehow not caused by God," events we call "sin" or "evil," is actually to highlight the mystery with uncompromising starkness.[77] The

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[74] Ibid.

[75] As Tertullian memorably put it, the flesh (*caro*) is the pivot (*cardo*) on which salvation turns (*De resurrectione carnis*, par. 8). It is notable also that Tertullian drew explicit connections between *creatio ex nihilo* and the resurrection of the dead (par. 11).

[76] Caputo, *Weakness of God* 87.

[77] Placher, *Domestication of Transcendence* 211.

appeal to creaturely free will, however necessary at some level, cannot ultimately justify and make comprehensible the excess of evil and suffering in our history. But no more helpful is the attempt to declare God somehow limited by creation—or, more strongly, incapable of causative action. Even if such a maneuver relieves some of the tensions entailed in this mystery, it can make almost no sense of the biblical witness to divine activity in the world, and least of all the New Testament affirmation that God has raised the innocent victim Jesus from the nonbeing of death as the effective promise for the whole of creation.

To the extent that *creatio ex nihilo* is understood not as a speculative assertion about the first instant of creation but a hopeful doctrine expressing something fundamental about how God continuously relates to creation, it also allows us to say that "nothing" keeps God from being present to creation in all its contingency and ambiguity. "The very fact that God the Wholly Other is Creator means," writes Edward Schillebeeckx, "that he is also the Ultimate-Intimate One, the One Wholly near at hand."[78] Unconditioned transcendence means unconditioned immanence, and so presence to and solidarity with creatures in the midst of felt separation from God, even death on a cross. This is what Schillebeeckx means elsewhere when he describes the creator God as a God of "pure positivity." The creator God who summons creation "up out of nothing" is the God in whom "negativity cannot have a cause or motive."[79] How can Christians assert this? Or better, why must Christians assert this? Not from a general theory of God arrived at by unmoored speculation, but from God's liberating and reconciling self-bestowal in the Easter event:

from the "God of Jesus", namely from Christian belief in the *resurrection* of Jesus. For it emerges that God transcends these negative aspects in our history, not so much by allowing them as *by overcoming them*, making them as though they had not happened. By nature, and in addition to other aspects and meanings, the resurrection of Jesus is also a corrective, a victory over the negativity of suffering and even death.[80]

Schillebeeckx rightly refuses to say that God in any way "uses" evil or innocent suffering toward some greater purpose, as though God were somehow causatively involved in what diminishes creation. However, taking Jesus' resurrection from the dead as primordially disclosive of God's character, we can say that divine activity is found in extending

[78] Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, trans. Hubert Hoskins (New York: Crossroad, 1985) 627.

[79] Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*, trans. John Bowden (New York: Crossroad, 1990) 727, 728. In this formulation Schillebeeckx draws explicitly from Thomas Aquinas's assessment of *creatio ex nihilo* (*In II Sent.* d. 37, q. 2, a. 1, ad 2).

[80] Schillebeeckx, *Christ* 729.

reconciliation where there is conflict, healing where there is violence, and eschatological fulfillment where there is death. "Only *in* the overcoming of [evil and innocent suffering] can we say that the negative aspects in our history have an indirect role in God's plan of salvation: *God is the Lord of history*. . . . God wants [our] *salvation*, and in it victory over [our] suffering."[81]

That God can do this, and has done this for Christ, in whom creation has its origin and hope, is an affirmation with far-reaching implications for how we are to live. To affirm that God can be wholly available in our weakness because God's power has nothing at all against which to strive can mean, for those who would inhabit such faith, living from and to a power that is all the more vulnerable because all the more free. To affirm that the creator God indwells the grit and grief of our human lives because God's freedom has no need to protect itself can mean, for those who would be "imitators of God" (Eph 5:1), a willingness to indwell the suffering of others as agents of transformative justice and reconciliation. To affirm that God's relationship to creation is not competitive or rivalrous, but gratuitous and pacific, can mean, for those who would become hospitable to this relationship in prayer and the formation of new behavioral patterns, a shift in desire from the compulsive need to dominate others to the creative liberty of self-emptying. To perceive the inner coherence of such affirmations, along with their practical implications, is to begin to understand the difference nothing makes.

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[81] Ibid. 729–30.