

The Idea of Creation in Historical Perspective

H. Dermot McDonald

[p.27]

To most normal persons the world is an undoubted existent. It is a reality 'out there', and the fact of its being there calls for some explanation. There are broadly two answers to the question of the world's existence. To some it is an entity which always was. To others it is an actuality which once was not, but which either somehow came into existence for no reason at all or was brought into being by the action of some other and outside agency in fulfilment of a divine purpose. Non-theistic Existentialists are content to say that the world is just there. We can only accept its 'factness' without asking for a reason. There is, in truth, no rhyme or reason anywhere. Existence—the world's and man's—is, according to Sartre, 'quite idiotic'. There is nothing to lean on save the indomitable purpose to lean on nothing. The contingency of existence is not even, as it is for Christian Existentialism, an exciting mystery. It is just plain nonsense; a complete irrationality and an unaccountable stupidity. It is even absurd that there should be this absurdity. There is no accounting for the world's "being there", It just is and that's an end of it.

For the Humanist the position is not greatly different. Here the creed is quite simple: 'this life is all and enough'¹. Everything is as it is and must be taken as it is. There is no other reason than that things 'happen' this way. Matter is there as itself, self-existing, self-active, self-developing, self-enduring. There is no great over-all purpose in the cosmos. And we are forbidden from asking the question 'Why?' Why should there have been a universe in the first place? Why is there any existence at all? Such questions pre-suppose answers in terms of purpose and for the Humanist there is no purpose. Thus in the light of the persistent demand for a reason we are rebuked to silence. Yet we are encouraged to believe that there is nothing mysterious in the notion that life and finally human beings should have arisen out of such 'remarkable stuff' as matter as it is pronounced to be by one noted Humanist. So remarkable indeed is this 'stuff' called 'matter', we are informed, that it was always there without the need of any power to bring it into being and any presence to keep it in existence.² But such an unadventurous doctrine cannot so easily smother the spirit of enquiry with its 'no 'Why?' questions permitted'.

For the Christian theist it is far otherwise. He believes that the universe, as an existent reality, was ushered into being by the creative voice of God. He lives, he is convinced, in a world originated and controlled by God. And he finds the source and confirmation of this faith in the Bible. The Bible begins with an account of God's creative activity. But it is altogether wrong to suppose that this is a mere introductory word which can be quickly passed over so that attention may be given to greater and more important matters. The truth is rather that here is the primeval word, the fundamental word supporting all else. The idea of God as Creator is the keystone of the arch of the whole biblical message. Should it be dislodged everything else would collapse. Rightly to understand what the Bible means by God as Creator is rightly to understand the whole Bible. All else is

¹ Cf. Corliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, 1961, ch. iii.

² *Op. cit.*, ch. iv. Cf. *The Humanist Frame*, by Julian Huxley, 1961, 42f.

[p.28]

involved in this one truth.³ The biblical account makes emphatic its belief in an absolute creation. The fact of the world's existence is referred to the action of God. The focus of the Genesis statement is upon God. And for this reason it is more correct to read the biblical passages, not so much as giving details of the method of creation itself, as directing attention to God as the ultimate source and cause of all things. It is therefore significant to observe that the name of God occurs thirty-two times in the thirty-one verses of Genesis chapter one.

Calvin takes the order of the creative events as making manifest God's paternal goodness towards the race and as a sure witness and herald of the one only Creator; Here is set before us not the bare essence of God, but more particularly His eternal Wisdom and Spirit, in order that we may not dream of any other God than Him who desires to be recognised in that express image.⁴

The idea of creation as the coming into existence of something which was not *creatio ex nihilo* as the phrase is—seems to be a distinctly Biblical thought. It is, that is to say, a truth of revelation. By faith, the Epistle to the Hebrews declares, we understand that the worlds were framed by the Word of God.⁵ It is a merit with Aquinas that he took seriously both these truths—that this is a God—originated universe and the assurance of His creative activity belongs to the realm of faith, Aquinas reversed the Augustinian world-view by making his starting-point the truth that God had created the world. It became, therefore, a fundamental axiom for him that the cosmos, as God's work, is our surest evidence of His existence. At the same time, while Aquinas was open to proofs for the world as created actuality, he considered that its duration lay outside the scope of metaphysical reality. It is a matter of faith, he declares, that the world had a beginning; it is not demonstrable or knowable.⁶

Greek philosophy at its highest does not appear to have arrived at the concept of a Creator who produced the world by divine fiat without the use of some pre-existing substance. The noblest expression of pre-Christian philosophical thinking on the subject is that found in Plato's *Timaeus*. In a passage which has claimed the attention of several writers, Plato declares: 'Let me tell you, then, why the Creator made this world of generation. He is good, and good cannot have jealousy of anything. And being free from jealousy he desired that all things should be a like himself as they could be.'⁷ Some commentators have taken the expression 'made this world of generation' to be virtually an equivalent of the Christian doctrine *creatio ex nihilo*. But this is certainly to read too much into the phrase. In an exegetical discussion of the passage in the Introduction to his translation of the *Timaeus*, Benjamin Jowett makes it clear that Plato did not regard God as the Creator in the specific Christian sense of the term. He did not conceive of God as calling the world into existence 'out of nothing'. Plato rather viewed creation as the bringing of order out of chaos. He conceives of the Demiurgus as essentially a contractor whose activity is limited by Ἀνάγκη.

³ Cf. Emil Brunner, *Our Faith*, 1936, 16.

⁴ Cf. *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, i., ch. xiv.

⁵ Ch. xi. 3.

⁶ *Summa Theol.*, 1a, q. 46, a. 2.

⁷ *Timaeus*, 29. It may be noted, however, that the idea of a *creatio ex nihilo* was known to Lucretius who repudiated the view: see *De Deum Natura*, Bk. i., 146-214.

It was, in fact, as a repudiation of all such notions that the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* was declared. Thus Irenaeus, for example, reproaches the Gnostics for not believing that God, who is powerful and rich in all resource could not create matter itself. They have forgotten that the things which are impossible with man are possible with God. 'While men indeed cannot make anything, God is in this point pre-eminently superior to man, that He Himself called into being the substance of His creation, when previously it had no existence.'⁸

[p.2]

In almost identical words Augustine renounced his allegiance to Manichaeism.

The idea of *creatio ex nihilo* has historically been referred to the temporal beginning of the universe and is interpreted as implying a free act of God by which, without the use of pre-existing materials, He brought into existence the whole universe of visible and invisible things.

By a strange irony, however, some have come to interpret the 'nothing' as itself a sort of substance out of which the world was brought into being. Thus 'nothing' has been conceived of as possessing a reality of its own, a substantive existence wearing the aspect of that 'Necessity' which acted as a limiting condition in the platonic understanding of creation. By some sort of magical process God is supposed to have brought 'something' out of the substance 'nothing'; 'being' out of existing 'non-being'.

It may be difficult for us, or, perhaps quite impossible, as E. L. Mascall thinks, to envisage a hypo-stated non-being as the material of creation,⁹ but it is the presence of any such prior substance that the phrase *creatio ex nihilo* is meant to exclude. The Genesis account leaves the reader with the sure conviction that the heaven and earth, and all therein, were the result of the uttered commands of God. There was no substance designated 'nothing' or 'something', 'being' or 'non-being' upon which He worked. Schleiermacher rightly observed that the idea stressed by the phrase is that before the origin of the world there was no other reality outside God which as 'matter' could enter into the formation of the world.¹⁰

The Church coming early into contact with Gnosticism found itself compelled to take its stand against its obvious dualism. The Alexandrian Gnostics viewed 'matter' as an unconscious, negative and imperfect substance upon which, either the ultimate good God acting through an intermediary, or, a hostile evil being acting directly, worked to shape the world. It was historically against this stark dualistic view that the Christian doctrine *creatio ex nihilo* sought to guard.

Christian faith by declaring for *creatio ex nihilo* endeavoured to assert that God is Creator and not a mere artificer. In Him is to be found the sole explanation of the existence of the world, as well as its detailed arrangements.¹¹ God is responsible for the world: the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof. Everything that exists is dependent upon Him, although the world as such is not to be identified with Him.

⁸ Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, 11, 10, 4.

⁹ *Existence and Analogy*, 1949, 145.

¹⁰ Cf. *The Christian Faith* (ET. 1898), 153.

¹¹ Cf. A. S. Pringle-Pattison, *The Idea of God*, 1920, 306, 7.

Throughout the history of Christian doctrine, however, the phrase 'creation out of nothing' has been taken as the premise for different, if not indeed, opposing conclusions, according to whether it is interpreted as distinguishing the world sharply from God or relating the world closely with God. When the emphasis has been put upon the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* as implying that, while there was no pre-existing material out of which the present world was formed, yet what is created is of a nature other than its Creator, then the tendency has been to sever the universe from God and consequently to incline towards deism. The problem is, then, to understand both, why there should be anything other than God and to give effective account of God's relation to it as now existing. On the other hand, when the concept has been used so as to suggest that since there was nothing 'outside God' upon which He operated to form the world, then created reality must be regarded as of the same substance as Deity and as produced by successive emanations from the 'stuff' of His being. Those who have taken this line have

[p.30]

been concerned to bring the world and God into intimate relationship by denying the independent role of matter. The more closely, however, the world and God are thus associated the greater is the tendency towards pantheism. The problem here is to maintain the authentic 'otherness' of the world and to give meaning to the Christian conviction of God as personal being.

Under the influence of neo-Platonism it turned out that it was this latter view, the emanationist, which made the stronger appeal. And by no means all those who fell under its spell stood outside the main stream of Christian doctrine. There were many, eminent Churchmen in their day and way, who gave expression to, at least, a tentative pantheism. At the head of this emanationist understanding of creation stands the anonymous fourth century writer Denys the Areopagite. Although Denys owns his indebtedness on a number of occasions to Plotinus and Proclus he seeks, with questionable success, to give an unequivocal Christian stamp to his account of God's relation to the world. In his four major works which have survived—*The Mystical Theology*, *On Celestial Hierarchy*, *On Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, *The Divine Names*—Denys unites the world so intimately with God that he can speak of it as a 'theophany'. He takes pains to underscore that creation is, therefore, God's revelation or manifestation through His works. There is a 'hierarchy' or scale of being emanating from Pure Being; and a being has its nature defined by its degree of elongation from God. At the top there is pure Intelligence; and at the bottom is matter. Each member of this universal hierarchy is irradiated, after its kind, by the divine 'illumination' which makes it both to be, and to be just what it is. But each rank of being receives its gift of light, which is its very being, in order to transmit it, in turn, to a lower rank. In the end, however, the lowest rank can only find its cause and reason in Ultimate Being itself. Thus the wheel comes full circle. What is of God, exists *through* God, and returns to God again. This view of the world's existence as emanating from God and flowing back to Him again became basic in the thought of numerous successive writers. Some took over Denys' Platonism *in toto*, fascinated by his teaching that since God is not wholly other and altogether different then He can be approached: through His creatures, as it is by right of supreme good that God created them. Others, however, felt bound to modify his view in order to make it compatible to Latin minds. Thus, although the doctrine of Denys called for many precisions and corrections, or, more particularly, for a reinterpretation in terms of a metaphysics of being, it provided, at the same time, successive

thinkers with a general framework within which their own interpretation of the world's existence could more readily be given vogue.

This evidence of heavy indebtedness to the writings of the pseudo-Areopagite can be seen in the work of the brilliant and enigmatic writer of the mid-ninth century, John Scotus Erigena. Both in his master-work, *De Divisione Naturae* and his *Commentary on the Celestial Hierarchy* of Denys he makes clear his allegiance to the basic metaphysical structure of his mentor's teaching. John the Scot, as he is otherwise called, sought to combine under the influence of Denys, an emanationist combined with a creationist view of the origin of existing actualities. All things, he declared, have their source and goal in the Divine Nature. There is, too, as in the pseudo-Areopagite, the same thought of the circle of being in which all things are regarded as coming out of God and returning to Him again. God, while still maintaining His own essential being and still remaining One, became the

[p.31]

Many by a process of descent into the physical world. But, according to the cyclical principle, the Many must find their goal in union with the One. In this ultimate consummation, however, there will be no destruction of essences and substances. All that is has thus come to be and can be appropriately described as having been 'created out of nothing'. The 'Nothing' is not, however, to be conceived as some alien substance. Rather, declares John, 'Nothing' is to be identified with God who because of His pre-eminence is not improperly so called. Thus by creating the world 'out of nothing' God is in fact creating it out of Himself.

Erigena seeks to clarify this teaching by his use of the category 'theophany' to account for the process of the creative act. The Divine Essence, which is beyond all predications and is, therefore, strictly to be referred to as 'Nothing' enters into spatio-temporal conditions by means of theophanies. Related, thus, in the thought of Erigena, are creation and revelation. Creation is, in truth, the self-manifestation of God; of His unity through the created pluralities. God's creation is, then, as he puts it, an 'apparition of God'. Since with God to create is to reveal, this means that in saying that God reveals Himself we are saying He creates Himself. In John's division of nature it is the divine Ideas which stand first in order. They are both created and creators: created because posterior to God and derived from Him and creators because they are in their turn the bearers of being to the next in order in the scale of being. In the end, therefore, John seems to conceive of creation as a procession from God, first of Ideas and on through the downward hierarchy of genera, sub-genera, and species, to individual substances. But since the Ideas are immediately related to God they are without beginning because forever in God; yet since generated they can be said to be created. So, too, is it with the world: as an archetype in the Eternal Mind it is without beginning, yet there was a beginning 'in time', a coming to be 'out of nothing'—a creation. From His super-essence, says Erigena, God creates essences, from His super-life and super-intelligence He makes life and intelligences. From the negation of all things which are and are not, He produces the affirmation of all things which are and are not.

Nicholas of Cusa, one of the dominating figures in the ecclesiastical and intellectual life of the first half of the fifteenth century, followed the same general scheme as that of Denys and Erigena. We know that Nicholas studied intensively the pseudo-Dionysius in the years 1438-9 and made its teaching, however unconsciously, the foundation of his *De Docta Ignorantia* of 1440. Nicholas, however, was (apparently) not too keen to admit any such decisive

influence. In his *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* he states that he had not referred to Dionysius nor to any other of the 'true theologians' until after he had set down the 'revelation' he had himself received. Yet he does make a passing reference to the 'most noble Denys' in the *De Docta Ignorantia* itself.

Nicholas certainly gives Christ a more central place in his interpretation than did either Denys or Erigena and thus earned for himself the title Doctor Christianus. This fact, together with his adoption of extreme papalism after the year 1433, assured to the cardinal immunity from any suspicion of heresy. Nicholas sees the world as the visible appearance of the invisible God. God may be regarded as the fulness of the world. In God there is the coincidence of all opposites. Both in his *De Docta Ignorantia* and *De Visione Dei* he stresses, to use some phrases of his own from the latter work, that God is the Nature of all natures, the Reason of

[p.32]

all reasons, and the Essence of all essences. One of his special notes is his insistence upon the divine 'seeing'. With God, he says, to see is to cause. A thing exists, he declares, in the measure wherein God beholds it and it could not exist in reality did it not behold Him. God's sight is God's essence.¹² God is, therefore, 'Absolute Sight', and it is by His seeing that all things are and continue to be. His constant declarations that all things exist by the seeing of God has a Berkeleyan ring about it and raises the question whether the later bishop drew some of his inspiration for his brand of Idealism from the earlier cardinal.

With God, Nicholas teaches, to see is to create and He sees nothing but Himself. How, then, he asks, can God create what is not Himself? God is the aggregate of all things. He is the 'development' and 'meaning' inherent in all. Nicholas pays homage to conventional doctrine by insisting that although there was a necessity in God to create since He is by nature good and must communicate Himself, He still acts in creation by His free volition. He has long expositions on the way the infinite God may be said to be related to finite things; but he fails to make clear how creation as a necessary development of the divine nature is to be reconciled with the idea of creation as a free act of God.

An emanationism with such pantheistic leanings was bound to land some in a pronounced form of monism. We are not surprised therefore to learn that the inevitable happened. David of Dinant, for example, in the thirteenth century taught what G. Théry has called a 'panthéisme matérialiste', which has more than superficial resemblances to Spinoza. The little that we know of David's teaching seems to show, as H. Brett observes, that it was a reckless development of Erigena's doctrine.¹³ He appears definitely to identify God and matter by making God the substance alike of all bodies and souls. The soul is to be regarded as a material entity like the body: an idea which might have won him more sympathy if he had claimed, as he could, the support of Tertullian who certainly maintained the idea of the soul's materiality.

An even more extreme form of monistic absolutism was presented by Amaury of Belle, a senior contemporary of David's. His condemnation in 1210 did not prevent the diffusion of

¹² Cf. *Op. cit.*, ch. x., xii., etc.

¹³ *Johannes Scotus Erigena*, 178.

his teaching through a group of 'Amaurians' who continued to emphasise the identification of God with all things.

These and like views called forth the special scorn of Aquinas who speaks of the 'insania' of David. In a passage in which the Angelic Doctor discusses the question whether God enters into the composition of all things he refers to what he contends are three erroneous views: 'Some have affirmed', he writes, 'that God is the world soul, as is clear from Augustine (*De Civit. Dei* vii. 6). This is particularly the error of those who assert that God is the soul of the highest heaven. Again, some have said that God is the formal principle of all things; and this was the theory of the Almericans. The third error is that of David of Dinant, who most absurdly taught that God was primary matter.'¹⁴

But what has Aquinas himself to say regarding creation? He was specially concerned to give actuality and autonomy to created existences. In this way he struck, what we may call, a new note of stark realism which was greatly needed. The prevailing tendency and teaching were in the direction of a spiritualistic and symbolistic unworldliness. So denaturalised was the natural world that it wore the aspect of something unreal; and in the eyes of most of Aquinas's contemporaries he was reckoned the most 'spiritual' who treated nature the more unnaturally.

[p.33]

Against this old Augustinian-Cluniac view which regarded the natural order with something akin to a morbid contempt, Aquinas took a firm stand.

In this connection he had certainly caught some of the Hohenstaufen spirit, the 'spirit, that is, of hearty and healthy worldliness which emanated from the court of the emperors of Palermo. Under the influence of the rediscovered works of Aristotle his keenest teachers refused to write off the realm of nature as of nothing worth or worthy.

More particularly Aquinas learned from Aristotle that the *libri naturales* were not forbidden books, but were open to all who would take the time and the trouble to master their language and their message. As a student at the University of Naples, Aquinas had come under the spell of the eloquent Irishman, Peter of Hibernia, who taught a most radical detheologised Aristotlianism. True, Thomas did not allow himself to become the victim of the secular spirit which pervaded this centre of learning and which, because of its independence of Rome, proudly proclaimed its interest in Aristotle's works, then under official papal interdict. What Aquinas did learn, however, was that there was a world of real realities, and not a whole array of mere spiritualistic symbols.

What Aquinas repudiated, then, was the exclusively theological view of the universe, the view, that is, which made nature itself, according to the Platonic-Aristotlian tradition, the mere copy of the real. Yet it must be immediately added that while Aquinas rejected this theological view of the world his understanding of the world was none the less profoundly theological. He defends with all his might and skill the rights of natural things, but he does not infringe in the least degree on the rights of God. He illustrates the way nature was

¹⁴ *Summa Theol.* Q. 3. Art. 8.

generally conceived in his day; fire, for example, was not considered as fire, *a se ipso*, but only in so far as it may be shown to refer to God and as exhibiting the divine sovereignty.¹⁵

Aquinas sets himself the task, if we may so put it, of defending the right of fire to be considered simply as fire. He was concerned with the real world, and he did not regard this as in any way compromising the sovereignty of God. Indeed, he sought to show that it was precisely because natural things were *creatura* that they were real: and that they were real moreover because created. Natural things have their own self-contained intrinsic being by reason of the fact that each is the result of God's creative will, which will is by its very nature 'being-giving'. For Aquinas 'to create' is precisely 'to communicate being'; to give actuality to independent, real existences. 'The first fruit of God's activity in things', he declares, 'is existence itself: all other effects presuppose it—existence'.¹⁶

In contrast with Augustine to whom to create is to give existence, Thomas regards creation as the communication of being. Augustine's idea of creation, as the act by which the *He who is*, makes things to be what they are, resulted, as Gilson observes, in a complete de-existentialization of the notion of creation. Thomas, on the one hand, took the line that things are not 'in existence' by reason of what they are, but only as a consequence of the communication to them of the *actus essendi*. It is, he contends, here we have the true idea of creation: 'Because God by virtue of His essence is existence itself, therefore the existence of what he has created is necessarily a producing peculiar to His essence; just as flaming up is the effect peculiar to the essence of fire.'¹⁷ It is for this reason that Jacques

[p.34]

Maritain refers to Aquinas, not just as one existentialist philosopher among others, but as 'le plus existentiel des philosophes.'

For Thomas, therefore, every thing is good in its own order by reason of its createdness; because, that is, its distinctive and real 'being' is communicated to it by God. Indeed, for Aquinas, not only is everything that is, good, but it is good just because it is 'idem est unicuique rei essi et bonum esse' ('for everything to be and to be good, is the same').¹⁸ Thomas consequently sees the world *per se*, and in its own right, as the proper object of study. He has no need to dehumanise man or to denaturalise nature. Thus, sin is not of the order of things. It is an intruder, while the natural state and structure of the world as given 'being' by God is perfect.

Aquinas's concern, however, is not to defend natural and visible reality so as to make good his right to read the book of nature without theological glasses. This was the purpose of the Aristotelianism of Peter of Hibernia. Much as Aquinas sought to justify the actuality of individual existences he would still not have us regard the world without God. Rather, he contends, since everything that is is flamed up out of the *actus purus*, all things bring us face to face with this reality—with God, as Pure Ultimate Being.

¹⁵ Cf. *Summa Contra-Gent.* 2, 4 (1).

¹⁶ *Compend. Theol.* 1, 68, No. 119.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1, 8, 1.

¹⁸ *De hebdomadibus (Commentary on Boethius, Essays on Axioms)* 3, No. 50.

At the same time Aquinas's realism, in which he sees man as an actual corporeal existent, leads him to give the utmost stress to the doctrine of the Incarnation. In a commentary on the Gospel of St. John he underscores the phrase the Word was 'made flesh'. He makes it clear that the term 'flesh' is to be taken in its fullest and starkest meaning and measure. Not only does the expression exclude any Manichaeic notion that the body, as such, is evil, but it forbids us from ever concluding that the material world itself is not good.

Thus, while he did follow Aristotle in making nature real, Aquinas would not permit us to have nature without God. On the other hand, while he rejected the spiritualistic symbolic view of nature, he does not leave us with a God without nature.

But the pantheistic and monistic tendency of emanationism continued. Even if Denys's and Erigena's doctrine could, and maybe should, have been read in panentheistic terms, it assuredly left itself open to a more radical conclusion. First mediaeval mysticism and later absolute idealism are to be found expounding the idea of creation as essentially the coming to be of temporary manifestations within the Absolute. Approaching the Ultimate All-inclusive through the medium of the feelings the mystics came to a position of religious absolutism: and approaching the Ultimate All-inclusive through the reason the absolute idealists arrived at a position of philosophical monism. Both consequently were driven to regard created actualities as wearing the aspect of appearance only—a fact which may be seen as true for Eckhart as for Hegel.

Absolute idealism, however, despite the vogue given to it by Stirling and Bradley, did not long survive. Voices of protest were soon raised against its submerging of the individual in an all-devouring whole. Bradley's book *Appearance and Reality*, in which the most consistent elaboration of Hegelianism was given, was pronounced by one wit as the disappearance of reality. The pluralistic and theistic idealists set themselves to rescue the world of men and things from being mere bubbles on the sea of being. They sought to give them a status and security as real entities. In so doing they brought to the fore once again the problem of their relation as existing actualities to the Ultimate One. But by stressing their con-

[p.35]

tinued connectedness with, rather than their specific distinction from, Ultimate Reality they found themselves reviving some form of emanationist theory. Pringle-Pattison, for example, argued that creation is a divine act of manifestation. It is not, he protests, the making of something out of nothing in the sense in which the orthodox statement intends—the commanding into actuality of existences which previously were not—it is rather the revelation in and to finite spirits of the infinite riches of the divine life. He rejects, what he regards as the notion of a Pre-existent Deity not yet crowned with the highest attributes of goodness and self-revealing love. And he is at odds with Augustine whom he interprets as conceiving of creation as a unique event not grounded in the nature of God.¹⁹ Spirits are not to be viewed as things made; detached like products from their maker. They are aptly described, he asserts, in the biblical phrase as partakers of the divine nature.²⁰

¹⁹ Cf. *The Idea of God*, 303.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 315.

Bosanquet had from a more absolutist standpoint already stated that the world is that through which Spirit attains incarnation. No idea of a creation in the orthodox sense is admitted. Creation, if the term is still to be used, is to be conceived as the manifestation of the one Ultimate Ground of Being in the rich manifoldness of nature. Put quite simply: in the idealist metaphysic the idea of creation is viewed as the objectifications of the eternal thought process of God wherein He expresses Himself to Himself. It may indeed be more correct to say with Leonard Hodgson that this idealistic metaphysic is not really a doctrine of creation at all. For to say that this universe is the mode in which the eternal God is expressing Himself to Himself in what appears to us in space and time is not the same thing as to say that it owes its existence to the will of God, that God has called it into existence for some reason of His own, and has given to it a mode of reality which that purpose requires.²¹

Even after the eclipse of idealism, theologians continued to be fascinated with the idea of the world as somehow the necessary other-side of God. They felt bound to relate God and the world closely so as to be rid of all deistic conclusions in which God's connection with it is viewed as remote and far-off. They were anxious to assert that this is God's world, but in doing so they found themselves hard put to it to escape from a pantheistic conclusion. Martensen, for example, argues that without the world God is not God.²² Love, not power, is the reason for its existence. Thus, since love is the ground of creation, we cannot suppose that God made the world for the sake of His glorification. Such an idea would give us a picture of Him as a Being of 'egoistic power' rather than of 'eternal love'. Creation is really a love-act of God in which He 'glorifies His love to Himself through love to the world'.²³ He still uses the expression *creatio ex nihilo* but in the sense that 'The nothing out of which God creates the world are the eternal possibilities of His will, which are the sources of all the actualities of the world'.²⁴

More recently Berdyaev reiterates the same general idea. He states that God with the world is somehow more complete than God without it. It is for this reason that he contends that the very idea of creation stands in need of revision and deepening.²⁵ The world is not something alien to God. The 'old doctrine', he declares, 'according to which God created man and the world, having in no respect any need of them ought to be abandoned as a servile doctrine which deprives the life of man and the world of all meaning'.²⁶ The world is not totally other than God. God is the very Ground and Core of its being.

[p.36]

A not dissimilar view is given by Tillich. He premises that the divine life is creative, actualising itself in inexhaustible abundance.²⁷ Thus are the divine life and the creative activity of God one and the same reality. God may be said to be eternally creating Himself. It is meaningless, therefore, to ask whether creation is a necessary or a contingent process. It is not 'necessary' since there is no necessity to which God must conform. Nor is it 'contingent' because it does not 'happen' to God. Creation is consequently to be understood as the basis

²¹ Lecture on 'Creation' in *For Faith and Freedom*, 1956, Vol. i., 143, 4.

²² Cf. *Christian Dogmatics*. 114.

²³ *Op. cit.* 115.

²⁴ *Op. cit.* 116.

²⁵ *Truth and Revelation*, 1953, 61f.

²⁶ *The Divine and Human*, 1949, 7.

²⁷ *Systematic Theology*, Vol. i. 280, 281. Cf. *Ultimate Concern: Dialogues with Students*, 1965, 169, 170, 174.

description of the relation of God and the world. It is not the story of an event which took place 'once upon a time'. Tillich regards the category *creatio ex nihilo* as distinctive of classical Christian doctrine and as marking therein a protest against any type of dualism.²⁸ The obvious meaning of the phrase is therefore that of a critical negation. But Tillich is not satisfied with this prohibitive use of the expression. It must be taken to imply more than a mere rejection of dualism. 'The word *ex* seems to refer to the origin of the creature. "Nothing" is what (or where) it comes from. Now "Nothing" can mean two things. It can mean the absolute negation of being (*ouk ōn*), or it can mean the relative negation of being (*mē on*). If *ex nihilo* meant the latter, it would be a restatement of the Greek doctrine of matter and form against which it is directed. If *ex nihilo* meant the absolute negation of being, it could not be the origin of the creature. Nevertheless, the term *ex nihilo* says something fundamentally important about the creature, namely, that it must take over what might be called "the heritage of non-being".²⁹ It is not at all clear what Tillich really intends by this discussion of *creatio ex nihilo*.

The significance of the phrase for him appears to be descriptive of the fundamental relation between God and the world. He avers, of course, that divine creativity and divine life are one and the same reality. The 'divine life is essentially creative', he asserts. He regards all three modes of time, past, present and future, as required to 'symbolise' God's creative activity. He has created the world, He is creative in the *present moment*, and He will creatively fulfil His telos. Tillich specifies more particularly God's originating creativity as meaning that all things derive their power of being from the one creative ground of divine life. The creation is *ex nihilo* in the sense that there is nothing 'given' to God 'which influences him in his creativity or which resists his creative *telos*'. But his statement that the creature takes over into its reality 'the heritage of non-being' would appear to give some measure of hypostatisation to 'Non-being' and thus a return to the dualism which he admits the phrase was originated to rule out. 'What Tillich has done is to make "nothing" out of which we come a something with fatal power'.³⁰ For Tillich the world and men are at the same time both within and outside the divine life. Both are characterised by 'creatureliness', and as such partake of the heritage of being and non-being. It is by participation in the creative power of being that existence acquires the sense of 'courage'. While by including in it the heritage of non-being the creature is subject to the burden of 'anxiety'. In the end, however, Tillich's doctrine is out of harmony with the traditional Christian understanding of *creatio ex nihilo* where it is taken as meaning that God is by nature other than the things He has made and yet He is at the same time the sole cause and reason for their existence.

The phrase *creatio ex nihilo* is not itself a Scriptural one,³¹ but it was early taken up by Christian writers as expressive of the biblical idea of creation. Augustine

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 281.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ J. Heywood Thomas, *Paul Tillich: An Appraisal*, 1963, 73.

³¹ The phrase does occur in the Vulgate translation of 2 Maccabees vii. 28. The passage reads in the English: 'I beseech thee, my son, look upon the heaven and the earth and all that consider that God made them out of things that were not: and so was mankind likewise made'. The phrase 'out of things that were not' is in the Greek, οὐκ ἐξ ὄντων, for which the Vulgate has '*ex nihilo*'. But see Jubilees xii. 4 and Hebrews xi. 3. See article 'Creatio ex nihilo' by Arnold Ehrhardt in *Studia Theologica*, Vol. xii. 1, 86-111, reprinted in *The Framework of the New Testament Stories*, 1964, ch. ix., especially pp. 214f. There is uncertainty as to the position of Philo on the 'how' of the world's existence. 'On the whole', says Ehrhardt, 'it seems quite in vain to expect any consistency on the part of Philo with regard to the creation of the cosmos. Drummond seems to have assumed that Philo's general approach was in favour of '*creatio ex nihilo*'. E. Bréhier, on the other hand, has shown strong reasons why it

[p.37]

may be said to have given to the expression its specific orthodox connotation. In his *opus imperfectum, Contra Julianum*, Augustine makes the point that by saying that because the world is made out of nothing and not from God we do not hypostatise the 'Nothing'. We rather distinguish the nature of God from the nature of the things made.³² For Augustine, therefore, the creation is seen as a unique event. It is the bringing into being of that which is not by nature of the 'stuff' or 'φύσις' of deity. He amplifies his view in his *De Genesi* and the three last books of his *Confessions*. In the latter work he interprets the Mosaic account of creation in a spiritual and mystical sense; but even here, and more particularly in his Commentaries on the Six Days, he stresses that the creation was an act of God's free decision. There is, he insists, no cause other than God for the existence of things, and to seek for any such is the utmost folly. The will of God is the decisive factor; and there is no cause for His will outside Himself.

All that is has come about because of God's sheer goodness. There is no other reason for the world's existence than this. 'In that it is said, "God saw that it was good", there is a sufficient indication that God made what was made, not by any necessity nor by any need for something useful, but solely out of his goodness, that is to say because it is good'.³³ Augustine contrasts that which God begot from Himself—the Word—and which is therefore the actuality of His goodness, with that which He 'created out of nothing'—man's total nature—and which had therefore the potentiality of evil.³⁴

To reinforce his view that creation was complete as an instantaneous act of God he makes use of the passage in the Apocrypha, Ecclesiasticus xviii. 1. Augustine regards God's creative activity as having been accomplished 'at once'. The Greek here reads, ἔκτισεν τὰ πάντα κοινῇ, which is translated quite literally by the Revised Version as 'he created all things *in common*'. The Hebrew has *yahdaw* or 'together'. Any one of these phrases would suit what Augustine intends. For Augustine regards the totality of all that ever could be as having been created 'at once', 'in common', 'together'. The elements of every future thing was there from the first. The 'roots' of all things of which Empedokles spoke and the 'seeds' of Anaxagoras, which for both were something eternal and irreducible to anything else, were for Augustine the result of God's single instantaneous act of creation. The 'germs' of all future beings were given in the first instant of creation. Thus for Augustine, God's act of creation was over and done with. He has no thought of creation as a continuous act of God; an idea which seems to have appealed to some later writers, even to Aquinas.

A compromise on the clean-cut option between the two extremes of creation as an event in the past and of creation as a continuous process was suggested by certain Lutheran theologians of the seventeenth century. Gerhard and Quenstedt, among others, initiated a distinction between

should be assumed that Philo inclined towards a theory of *primaeva* matter, wherever he chose to state his views on the matter extensively. Still more impressive is the proof of R. Reitzenstein, how strongly Philo was influenced by current pagan creation myths. It is probably fair to say that Philo submitted to the combined strength of the Platonic and Stoic arguments of his teachers in the philosophical school of Alexandria—if somewhat unwillingly' (p. 218).

³² *Op. cit.* v. 44.

³³ *De Civit. Dei.* xi. 24.

³⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, xiv. 11.

Creatio prima seu immediata and Creatio secunda seu mediata. The first phrase was used to signify that originating act of God in which as a result of His own free volition He brought into being, out of nothing, the primary substances and elementary essences of all things. *Creatio secunda seu mediata* has reference, then, to the subsequent act of God in bringing into being different species and forms of things out of these already created substances and essences.

But whatever differences concerning details are to be found in the way that Christian faith in creation has been expressed, there is general agreement as to the

[p.38]

rightness to speak of it as *ex nihilo*. What Augustine had maintained with such clarity—that in the act of creating, God had no need of pre-existing material and that it was an act of His free volition—was carried through into constructive Christian dogmatics to become the standard statement of theological text-books. Thus Anselm in the eleventh century was emphatic that the phrase *ex nihilo* is alone adequate to secure the biblical truth that God is the sole productive cause of the universe. It prohibits, he contends, the implication that God is the very matter of the world He has made. In his *Monologium* Anselm states emphatically that in creation God had no need of any pre-existing material. What now exists, did not once exist: it came to be through the action of God's power in accordance with His wisdom and consequent upon His willing. Anselm does indeed confess some difficulty regarding the term 'nothing'. He investigates several ideas which the word can suggest and rejects them. He also sets aside the contention that if anything is said to have been created 'from nothing', it was created *de nihilo ipso*, that is, from what does not exist at all, as if this very thing 'nothing' were some existent being, from which something could be created. This notion, he says, assumes an irreconcilable contradiction. He comes then to the conclusion that to insist that the supreme Being created all things from nothing means that there was no 'anything' there to begin with. We may understand without inconsistency, the statement that the creative Being created all things from nothing as meaning that those things which before were nothing, are now something. From the very use of the word created we mean that the supreme Being created something, and that when they were created, they were created only as something.³⁵

For a final statement illustrating this idea of creation quotation may be made of the definition given by A. H. Strong in his much-used monumental Systematic Theology. 'By creation we mean', he said, 'that free act of the triune God by which in the beginning for his own glory he made, without the use of pre-existing materials, the whole visible and invisible universe'.³⁶

Central, therefore, in the dogmatic statement of Christian faith is the assertion that the world of matter is of a different 'stuff' from that of the nature of Deity. On the position of man, however, there is not quite the same accord. The Genesis account of man presents him as a combination of dust and deity. It has been found not an easy matter to give theological and philosophical exactness to this duality. At the same time there is general agreement that man is a created being bearing within himself a Godward as well as an earthward reference. Apart from a few speculative theologians such as Origen in the fourth and Julius Muller in the nineteenth century, the Church has consistently rejected the Platonic idea of the soul's pre-

³⁵ Cf. *Monologium*, chs. vi-vii.

³⁶ *Op. cit.*, 21889, 183.

existence. It has rather throughout viewed man's origin as the unity of the natural which God has created and the spiritual which God communicated. Thus man, too, no less than the world in which he finds himself, is a creation of God; a creature, the sole cause for whose existence is the free creative act of God. On the creation hypothesis, then, as W. R. Matthews has remarked, we face the full consequence of our faith that all things depend upon God and that He is responsible for the world because He willed it.³⁷

Two problems, the one concerning the relation between creation and time and the other concerning the specific understanding of what is meant by saying that the world had a beginning, are associated with the discussion of the world's origin.

[p.39]

The Christian assertion that the world came to be *ex nihilo* by the uttered commands of God brought to the fore the question of God's apparent inactivity before His willed relationship to His creation. According to Origen this was the one subject that objectors to the Christian doctrine 'generally raise'. They pose the question in the pretence that they are concerned about the honour of God. 'if the world has a beginning in time', they ask, 'what was God doing before the world began? For it is at once impious and absurd to say that the nature of God is inactive and immoveable, or to suppose that goodness at one time did not do good, and omnipotence at one time did not exercise its power'.³⁸

Augustine tells how he, too, was confronted with the same objection. He refers to those who 'full of their old leaven' ask, 'What was God doing before He made the heaven and earth? For if (they say) He were unemployed and wrought not, why does He not also henceforth, and for ever, as He did heretoforth?'³⁹

Origen did not answer the critics in the same brilliant way as did the later Augustine. His solution of the problem was to argue that the present world is not the first of God's creative acts. To those who ask about God's inactivity before He made the world, Origen's reply was simple: He was not inactive as you suppose. He is thus able, he asserts, to give them 'a logical answer in accordance with the standards of religion, when we say that not then for the first time did God begin to work when He made this visible world; but as, after its destruction, there will be another world, so also we believe that others existed before the present came into being'.⁴⁰

Augustine's reply, however, was far less naive. He will not, he declares, treat the subject frivolously as some have done. For they, when asked the question, What did God before He made the heaven and earth? have evaded the pressure of the problem by the jest that God was preparing hell for those who seek to pry into ultimate mysteries.⁴¹ Augustine approaches his answer by arguing that 'time' has no reality for God. He then seeks to show that it came into being with creation itself for 'without created being' there could be no 'time'. Augustine may have found a clue for his position in a passage of Plato's *Timaeus* with which he was specially

³⁷ *Studies in Christian Philosophy*, 1928, 211.

³⁸ *De Principiis*, iii., v. 3.

³⁹ *Confessions*, xi. 12.

⁴⁰ *De Principiis*, iii., v. 3.

⁴¹ *Confessions*, xi. 14.

familiar.⁴² Plato relates time to the perceptual world of becoming in distinction from eternity which relates to the intelligible world of being.⁴³ In the passage in the *Timaeus* to which we allude, Plato sees time as the moving image of eternity. But time, he asserts, was not before 'the father and creator' 'set the heaven in order'. He goes on then to declare that 'there were no days and nights and months and years before the heaven was created, but when he constructed the heaven he devised them also. They are all parts of time, and 'was' and 'will be' are created species of time which we in ourselves mistakenly apply to eternal being. For we say that it was, is, and will be; but in truth 'is' applies to it, while 'was' and 'will be' are properly said of becoming in time'.⁴⁴

Such is the solution of the conundrum offered by Augustine. 'But if before heaven and earth', he writes, 'there was no time, why is it demanded, What didst Thou then? For there was no "then" when there was no time'. 'At no time then hadst Thou made anything', he concludes, 'because time itself Thou madest'.⁴⁵ The whole idea of creation at a definite point in time is, therefore, a false one. Time is not a sort of substance into which the world was placed. The time-form did not antedate the creation of things; but, so to speak, came into existence with it. Creation is not '*in tempore*', but '*cum tempore*'.

[p.40]

The doctrine of Augustine seems to have silenced the objection for it does not appear to have caused much concern in after years. Leibniz, at a later period, found Augustine's view specially congenial as a solution of the related problems of space and time. They are not, he explains, in themselves substances but attributes. They are orders or arrangements of co-existing and successive things. Space is the grouping of phenomenal things; time their sequence. If, Leibniz argues, space were a separate reality then there would be no reason to offer as to why God should have put things this way and not that. Likewise if time existed independently of things then there is no way of explaining why God should not have created the world earlier. But since space is the way phenomenal things are placed in relation and time the way they are placed in sequence the questions do not arise.

The cogency of Augustine's argument, however, lost something of its point in the seventeenth century as a result of Newton's 'Receptacle' theory of space and time. Newton regarded both as having an absolute existence on their own account as the 'sensoria of God'. In this context there was once again a renewal of the ancient query, why did God wait so long before He acted?⁴⁶ But more recently Augustine seems to have come to his own again with the elaboration of the Quantum Theory and the General Theory of Relativity which have made the idea of absolute space and time less tenable. As a consequence Augustine's doctrine of creation '*cum tempore*' appears to have gained a respectable scientific justification. We thus may note that Professor A. C. B. Lovell in the *Reith Lectures* of 1958 declares that if the 'primeval atom' was created then time and space had their origin with it. 'Time in the sense of

⁴² Cf. *ibid.*, xi. 21.

⁴³ Cf. (W. Kneale) 'Time and Eternity in Theology'. Aristotlian Society Paper, 16th January, 1961.

⁴⁴ *Timaeus*, 37 E6-3A6.

⁴⁵ *De Civit. Dei*.

⁴⁶ Von Hartmann, for example, asserts that it is 'absolutely inconceivable that a conscious God should wait half an eternity without a good which ought to be' (quoted by James Ward in *The Realm of Ends*, ³1920, 233).

being measured by any clock did not exist before that moment, and space in the sense of being measured by a yardstick was contained entirely within the primeval atom'.⁴⁷

On the other hand, Pringle-Pattison will allow to Augustine a 'technical victory' only over his enemies. Augustine regards creation as a distinct event in which there was brought into existence that which had in no sense any prior reality. He thus fails, according to Pringle-Pattison, to relate creation in any actual sense to the eternal nature of God.⁴⁸

In company with a number of like-minded writers Pringle-Pattison seeks to give effective account of Anselm's declaration that created beings had some significant actuality in the thought of God before their creation. In this sense Anselm had argued that 'they were not nothing, so far as the Creator's thought is concerned'.⁴⁹ Pringle-Pattison contends that God as God is the creator of the world, and only as creator of the world is He God. He did not exist first as God and then as creator of the world. Therefore just because God did not become creator of the world, but is from eternity the Creator-God, so the world, though not eternal in itself, exists from eternity as the creation, or act, of God. Martensen, too, asserts that from one point of view creation may be described as 'eternal'. He explains his view in these words; 'So far as the cosmogony, and with the cosmogony the "birth of time", has its ground in a creative will, which is independent of all conditions of time, the creation of the world may be described as eternal. But so far as the activity of the creating will is conditioned by the successive growth of the creature, the world may be said to have originated in time'.⁵⁰

Although such a view has the merit of emphasising the utter dependence of the world upon God, the 'time' problem is certainly not here solved. According to

[p.41]

Martensen, by making the time-concept an unreality for God Augustine cannot avoid acosmism. He argues that if time has no existence for God, creatures too, whose development takes place in time, have no existence for God either.⁵¹ But there is no clear reason for this conclusion. Indeed the whole idea of an eternal creation is a difficult conception. If all that is intended is that creation was potential to God then there is nothing very original in the statement. But judging from all the fuss made by these writers it would appear that they wish the idea of eternal creation to be taken as something actual. In this case it must needs be distinguished from God; yet in making this distinction they are reintroducing a form of dualism which it is their declared purpose to deny.

It is at this point that the question of the relation of the world to time merges into that of its 'temporal beginning'. Those who argue for creation as having some eternal actuality naturally express scepticism, or, at least, uneasiness, on the subject of its 'beginning' in their anxiety to stress that the world as existing now rather than the world as begun then depends upon God. James Ward approaching creation from the two sides, its relation to the world and its relation to God, rejects the view that there was a 'beginning' at a finite time in the past. Looked at from the former angle, he contends that if the existing world is in fact a special production of

⁴⁷ Cf. Lecture 5.

⁴⁸ Cf. *The Idea of God*, 303.

⁴⁹ *Monologium*, ix.

⁵⁰ *Christian Dogmatics*, 124.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

God's creative act then it would exhibit the most direct and tangible evidence of His existence. We should, indeed, be virtually compelled to acknowledge the fact. But experience does not give any support to such an idea. On the other hand, if the subject is approached from God's side, the world must be viewed as something very deeply involved in the divine nature. To speak of God as Creator is simply to express the dependence of the world upon God. And this is tantamount to saying that God and the world are in some essential relation to each other. God is the Ground of the world's being, its *ratio essendi*.⁵²

W. R. Matthews maintains emphatically that an absolute beginning of the world 'in tempore' or even 'cum tempore' is no part of the idea of creation as it has any interest for the religious consciousness.⁵³ According to E. L. Mascall the concept of a creation is an abstraction, although it does, he admits, stand for a fundamental truth. He regards as altogether irrelevant to the idea of creation, the fact, if fact it is, that creatures had a beginning 'in time'. Creatures are created, he asserts, whether begun in time or not, provided only that they exist.⁵⁴ The position as it stands at the present is, then, a strange one. At a time when there was no scientific evidence at all for a 'beginning of the world', the fact that there was such a 'beginning' was declared to be a certain truth by theologians. But now that there seems to be some scientific evidence for an actual 'beginning' there appears to be a desire on the part of some theologians to deny to the world any temporal commencement. 'There is something ironical in the fact', says Mascall, 'that, in the days when a man of science was sure to be a deist if he had any religion at all, there was no scientific evidence for the fundamental hypothesis of deism, the hypothesis that the world has not always existed; for in recent years a number of arguments, deriving from very diverse considerations, have converged upon the conclusion that something which it is at any rate possible to interpret as the 'beginning of the world' took place at an epoch which can even be given approximate date'.⁵⁵

The entropological argument based on the Second Law of Thermo-dynamics—which will not be discussed here—has been taken by some as proof that the world

[p.42]

must have had a beginning in finite time. The idea of a *terminus a quo* for the world is strongly asserted by George Gamow in his book, *The Creation of the Universe* (1952), in which he rejects the idea of matter as an eternal self-creating reality. More recently William Pollard, who before his ordination into the Ministry of the Church, was Executive Director of the Oak Ridge Institute of Nuclear Studies in the United States, has defended the idea of a beginning of the world.⁵⁶ Giving special attention to the astronomical aspect of the question, Sir Edmund Whittaker confidently affirms that 'this is only one of many ways in which recent researches have led to the conclusion that the universe cannot have existed for an infinite time in the past, at any rate under the operation of the laws of nature as we know them: there must have been a beginning of the present cosmic order, a creation as we call it, and we are even in

⁵² Cf. *The Realm of Ends*, 231f.

⁵³ *Studies in the Philosophy of Religion*, 214.

⁵⁴ *Existence and Analogy*, 146.

⁵⁵ *Christian Theology and Natural Science*, 1956, 138, 9.

⁵⁶ Cf. his pamphlet, *The Cosmic Drama*. Pollard thinks that the world started about four hundred million years ago when a vast cloud of neutrons, each big with the future, suddenly appeared. From the radioactive decay of these neutrons there was produced protons and electrons which became unified into atomic nuclei.

a position to calculate approximately when it happened'.⁵⁷ Whittaker maintains that this beginning may without impropriety be called a 'creation'. He can indeed refer to it as a unique event, although he insists that as such it necessarily lies outside the scope of science altogether to investigate.⁵⁸ For this last assertion he is attacked by M. K. Munitz as perpetrating a 'methodological error of indulging in an *ignorabimus* which is nothing short of dogma'.⁵⁹ In spite of this castigation it remains a fact that there are some scientific indications of a beginning of the universe as a created entity.

On the other hand, the so-called 'steady-state theory of an expanding universe', in which is expounded the idea of the continued existence of self-creating matter has been acclaimed by its advocates as the true scientific account of the world's 'being here'. Rejecting in their different ways the traditional Christian doctrine of creation, Bondi, Gold, Hoyle and others, maintain that matter just is. It is eternally existing in a state of continuous creation. According to Fred Hoyle, the mighty and multitudinous galaxies which go to make up the universe are created out of what he calls 'background material' by a process of compression and condensation. The whole colossal universe is not static but 'expanding'—'a static universe is a dull affair'.⁶⁰ Energy is supplied to the universe from this background material by means of gravitation on the one hand and by reason of the atomic nature of the background material on the other hand. Hoyle contends that if the universe were static 'on a large scale' there would come a time when the background material would be used up. As a result 'the whole universe would become entirely dead'.⁶¹

But, although the galaxies are receding at an incredible speed, passing out of any possibility of ever being observed, the sky will never be empty. The outgoing galaxies will be replaced because 'new galaxies will have condensed out of this background material at just about the rate necessary to compensate for those that are being lost as a consequence of their passing beyond our observable universe'.⁶² There is, Hoyle is convinced, observational evidence for the dynamic nature of the universe to be gained from spectrology. From distant galaxies the pattern of light is 'reddened' in comparison with similar sources of light on the earth. This 'reddened' effect comes about when a body is moving away from us. This means that man finds himself in an expanding universe. The galaxies farthest off are moving away from us; receding indeed at a speed far greater than the light they emit, which means that the light of these distant galaxies will never reach the earth. Nor will the background material ever be exhausted for 'it seems likely that

[p.43]

new material is constantly being created so as to maintain a constant density in the background material'.⁶³

The question naturally arises as to the origin of this background material, which is in a state of continuous creation. To this question he can only answer that it 'simply appears—it is

⁵⁷ *Space and Spirit*, 1947, Reprint 1952, 116-7.

⁵⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 118, 121.

⁵⁹ *Space, Time and Creation*, 1961, 153.

⁶⁰ *The Nature of the Universe*, 1950, Reprint 1952, 97.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 104.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

created'.⁶⁴ 'At one time', he says again, 'the various atoms composing the material do not exist and at a later time they do'.⁶⁵ This, he acknowledges, may seem 'a very strange idea' and 'queer'. But he thinks that the idea of the whole creation coming as a result of one big band is 'queerer'.

He amplifies his theory of how, in a universe in which whole galaxies are receding and new ones coming into being by condensation of the background material, by urging that only a very slow creation is required. 'The constant material does not appear in a concentrated form in small localised regions but spread throughout the whole space. The average rate of appearance amounts to no more than the creation of one atom in the course of about a year in a volume of St. Paul's Cathedral. As you will realise, it would be quite impossible to detect such a rate of creation by direct experiment'.⁶⁶ With commendable honesty Hoyle states that man's unguided imagination could never have chanced on such a structure as he has set before the public. No literary genius, he ventures to affirm, could have invented a story one hundredth part as fantastic as the sober facts which have been unearthed by astronomical science. He thinks that Newton would have been quite unprepared for such a revelation as he has been able to disclose and that it would have had a shattering effect upon him.⁶⁷

That Hoyle has, in truth, revealed a vastly 'queerer' state of affairs than we could have ever supposed there need be no doubt. The more that comes to be known about the universe the more we certainly become aware of the expanding area of the unknown. But it is not easy, however, to reconcile Hoyle's declaration of the mysteriousness of the universe with his confidence in the finality of his speculations. For he wishes us to accept his work as a sure account and not really as a 'temporary daub'.

When we look at the final picture, even as a layman in the science of which Hoyle is a recognised expert, it does not appear so obvious how, what Hoyle has to say, can be squared with the bold claim that here we have the truly scientific statement of the existence of the universe. We are told, for example, that the 'make up' of matter by continuous creation necessary to meet the loss due to receding galaxies is so small as to be impossible to detect by observation or experiment. How then can such a doctrine be claimed to be scientific which lies outside the possible application of the scientific method? The idea seems to be as much an article of faith as the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. And it will be recalled that Hoyle begins his statement about the continuous creation of the background material to maintain its constant density with the remark 'it seems likely'. This is hardly a reassuring way to introduce an account which is claimed to be so scientifically undoubted.

Bondi, of course, assures us that in the steady-state theory the problem of the origin of the universe has been brought within the scope of physical enquiry, where it can be examined in detail instead of being handed over to metaphysics.⁶⁸ But it is not at all clear how this can be: nor is it easy to see how the claim to have rid cosmology of metaphysical and theological accretions can be sustained. Hoyle has castigated what he reads as attempts made to put the idea of the origin of the

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁶⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 111.

⁶⁸ *Cosmology*, 1960, 140.

[p.44]

universe outside the realm of scientific enquiry. To regard observable effects as arising from 'causes unknown to science' is, he maintains, against the very spirit of scientific enquiry. But does not Hoyle's own view come under the same condemnation? For, as Munitz has observed, by spreading out the creation in space and time, there is no reduction of the mystery, since multiplication of the occasions of creation as contrasted with the single unique event leaves it open to exactly the same objections as the latter.⁶⁹ In the steady-state theory there is denied any cause for the existence of this self-creating matter. It just is. 'It simply appears'; 'it is created', says Hoyle. Bondi declares that it was made 'out of nothing'. And according to what he designates as the 'Perfect Cosmological Principle' he feels able to assert that 'apart from local irregularities the universe presents the same aspect from any place at any time'.⁷⁰ But surely such statements are as metaphysical as can be. The background material, the 'inner-stellar material' comes from nowhere. Yet it is 'created'. It is created without a Creator: it is uncaused without a Cause. Such notions seem to make nonsense of words. 'Matter' like Topsy 'just grow'd'. Hoyle indeed maintains that it is meaningless to ask where does the newly created matter come from. It is like asking how did the conjurer pull the rabbit out of his hat. We know that the rabbit was there before the trick was done. If the rabbit were in fact created by the conjurer then the question would, he thinks, have no sense at all.

But is it not a basic assumption of science that things just do not 'happen' without a cause? Yet according to the theory before us, uncaused events beyond the possibility of calculation and prediction are said to be going on all the time. It is certainly a very queer state of affairs: and a metaphysical doctrine if ever there was one; not the truly scientific one.

Originally the idea of 'made out of nothing' was a firm declaration of faith in a Creator. For this reason unbelievers felt bound to repudiate the term. Today the situation is very different. The phrase *creatio ex nihilo*, which in the past was a *sine qua non* for the free activity of God in bringing the universe into existence, without the use of pre-existing materials, is now used to deny His existence and affirm the eternity of matter. Hoyle's 'simply appears' and Bondi's 'made out of nothing' merely state with a dogmatism which would put the most assured theologian to shame, the uncaused presence of the material out of which the whole cosmic order developed.

For some obscure reason Hoyle is concerned to deny that he is a 'materialist'. He certainly is not a materialist of the old-fashioned sort to whom the ultimate constituents of matter were conceived to be hard atoms. He is much more up-to date than that. His 'matter' is more in harmony with that suggested by recent physics: with Eddington's 'something unknown is doing we don't know what'. But there is no reason for the friends of religion to be excited by Hoyle's protest against being put in the materialists' camp. For, as W. H. V. Reade has cogently reminded us, it is a naive delight which is exhibited by those who rejoice to hear that the totality of matter is being whittled away by modern physics, as though Materialism would be any the less dangerous and any the more acceptable, if only matter could be made decently thin. It does not make the slightest difference whether matter is as hard as adamant, as stogy as suet, as volatile as gas, as agile as electricity, or as naked as a mathematical formula. The

⁶⁹ *Space, Time and Creation*, 157.

⁷⁰ *Cosmology*, 12.

only relevant question is whether it is self-existent or created by God. And in the end this is a question

[p.45]

upon which natural science can say nothing. It should, however, be noted that Professor Hoyle has recently withdrawn his allegiance to the 'steady-state' theory. In an article in the scientific journal *Nature* he specifies some of the reasons which have compelled this abandonment of a view which he has held and taught consistently for twenty years. The evidence from newly discovered quasi-stellar radio sources and other data indicate that the universe was once more dense than it now is: and such evidence counts against Hoyle's basic presupposition. Hoyle's present view is that the universe is in a state of flux, alternatively expanding and contracting in cycles that span billions of years. Hoyle has thus affirmed belief in an 'oscillating universe theory'. It is as well to underline the word belief since there are as yet no sufficient evidences for Hoyle's new view. The debunking of the 'steady-state' theory by its chief advocate must be viewed with some alarm by those who wish to rule God out of cosmogony altogether. Hoyle, however, cannot bring himself to accept the 'big bang' or 'suspense state' alternative of an oscillating universe. This view, according to some of its exponents does allow for possible actions of God. The Genesis account, it is pointed out, presents us with an earth 'without form and void', and is seen to be followed by transcendent creative events.

The idea however that 'matter' came into existence as a result of a 'big bang' due to an explosion, or as a series of 'little pops' as a consequence of the self-creating nature of matter gives no sufficient reason for the existence of the universe itself. The Christian does not admit as adequate such a deistic account of God's relation to the world, whether as the mere cause of the single unique occasion or indefinite number of occasions. He is not just the God of the 'big bang' or the 'little pops'. The 'big bang' and the 'little pops' could be made as consistent with atheism as with theism. The Christian asserts rather that the whole universe, in the materiality of its being and the actuality of its existence, depends upon God and upon God alone.

'When we say that God created the world out of nothing, we are not asserting a process which we can comprehend or can imagine, but declaring that God is the Source and Ground of all that is'.⁷¹ Upon Him, all that is depends. The Bible itself, as Karl Barth reminds us, does not attempt to answer all our eager questionings, either like the Sphinx with 'there is a reason', or, like a lawyer with a thousand arguments, deductions and parallels. It says, and says again: the decisive cause is *God*. Science, 'when true to itself, may describe this or that. But in the last analysis there is nothing *explained* without reference to God. The ultimate reason for the existence of the world is here: and it is this theological point of view which alone gives to the universe its significance and to life its seriousness. Aquinas makes the observation that 'they hold a plainly false opinion who say that in regard to the truth of religion it does not matter what a man thinks about the Creation so long as he has a correct opinion concerning God'.⁷² Does our excursion into history not give some colour to this judgment? And is not Aquinas surely right when he adds, 'nam error circa creaturas redundat in falsam de Deo sententiam'? 'an error concerning the Creation ends as false thinking about God'?

⁷¹ N. Micklem, *What is the Faith?* 1936, 79.

⁷² *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 2, 3.

Augustine recalls how in his early passion for wisdom he was 'kindled' with a 'great ardour' by the reading of Cicero's *Hortensius*. Its only drawback, he was to learn later, was 'that the Name of Christ was not there'.⁷³ It is in this Name, the Christian asserts, that we have the key to the riddle of the universe. In some very intimate and real sense this is God's world. It is other than God yet it is by God

[p.46]

and for God. And God, it is revealed, acts in and for His Son. The Incarnation, as the Word made flesh, is a standing reminder that the world is not independent of God; not something altogether alien in which He has no interest. 'All things came to be (ἐγενέτο) through (ἐγενέτο δία) Him and apart from Him not even one thing (οὐδε ἓν) was made that hath been made (γέγονεν)'.⁷⁴ Christ, then, the everlasting Son of the Father is the reason and the goal of all that is: 'for it was by him that all things were created both in heaven and on earth... he is prior to all, and all cohere in him'.⁷⁵

This biblical declaration must be taken in all its seriousness. By centring creation in Christ is meant that however much the present world lieth in the Evil One, it has not been wrenched out of God's control and care. Indeed, the anchorage which faith finds in this reality of a Christo-centric universe is this: that since He is the prototype of all creation we do not live in a God-abandoned world. God is neither dead, not done nor gone. It is in the reality of Christ that all creation gets its meaning, for it is in and through Him that the potentialities of being were made present actualities. As Karl Rahner, using Aristotlian categories of thought has observed, 'Christ has always been involved in the whole of history as its prospective entelechy'.⁷⁶ Put otherwise this is to say that Christ is prefigured in all creation. The universe in general is 'good' because it is the production of God's uttered command: and humanity in particular is 'very good' because made after the image of Him by whom all men were created. The total system participates in God, because He has shared with it the gift of existence and has bestowed something of His own goodness upon it. Thus whenever a creature is concerned with the aggrandisement of its own being and conceives of itself as existing by and for itself, it is really falling away from God and is ultimately bent on self-destruction. But when the creature is utterly careless of its own existence and pours itself out in creative love, then indeed it is participating most in God and is realising the highest potentialities that God has conferred.⁷⁷

Brunner is, therefore, quite on the mark in his declaration that the idea of God as Creator is the first and fundamental work of the Christian faith, which if taken away everything would collapse.⁷⁸ And everything would collapse, we should add, not just for religious faith, but for a coherent view of the universe itself. Maybe, too, the idea of God as Creator, should be taken as the last word no less than the first.

⁷³ Cf. *Confessions*, iii., iv.

⁷⁴ John i. 3.

⁷⁵ Col. i. 16, 17 (Moffatt's translation).

⁷⁶ *Theological Investigations*, 1961, 1, 167.

⁷⁷ Cf. J. MacQuarrie, 'The Pre-existence of Christ', *The Expository Times*, Vol. lxxvii., No. 7, April, 1966.

⁷⁸ *Our Faith*, 1936, 16.

In the idea of the universe as the result of God's creative activity we surely discover, what Teilhard de Chardin has called, 'the divinization of our activities' It is within the context of *Le Milieu Divin* that we come to 'the final solution' on the question of reality. de Chardin's syllogism brings us to the ultimate logic of the meaning of existence:—

'At the heart of our universe, each exists for God, in our Lord.

'But all reality, even material reality, around each one of us, exists for our souls.

'Hence, all sensible reality, around each one of us, exists, through our souls, for God in our Lord'.⁷⁹

This means that it is not, in the final reckoning, the rigid determination of matter and of large numbers, but the subtle combination of the spirit, that gives the universe its consistency. To be occupied therefore with the world is not to lose God; it is in a profound sense to find Him. To be pre-occupied with the world as the be all and end all is another matter; this is to miss Him in very truth. It is certainly the

[p.47]

case that 'by virtue of the Creation and, still more, of the Incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see'.⁸⁰ To faith's vision the reality of things will not dissolve into the stuff that dreams are made on. They will retain their concrete actuality, as firm and as fixed as before, but they will be seen in their relation to God, just as God will be conceived in relation to them. For God is the true Heart and Hub of the universe. And while the foreground message of Christianity is the coming of God to His universe, its background mystery is the transparency of God in His universe. The Divine which strikes the surface we know in the Epiphany and the Divine which penetrates the surface we understand as Diaphany.

It is the reality of the old creation which gives hope for the new. While on the other hand as P. T. Forsyth has observed, 'The final key to the first creation is the second'.⁸¹ *Haec est quae vincit mundum, fides nostra : in eadem domo, multae mansiones.*

© 1967 *London School of Theology* (<http://www.lst.ac.uk/>). Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in February 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

⁷⁹ *Le Milieu Divin*, 1937, E. T. Fontana 1964, 56.

⁸⁰ *Op. cit.* 66. Note: these allusions to de Chardin do not commit us to his eschatological view of creation, suggestive as it is in some respects. De Chardin quietly sets aside the idea of a special creation, and conceives of creation instead as in process, with the ultimate perfection of the total whole assured in the sacramental efficacy of Christ's Person and Word. A not dissimilar view is elaborated by Nicholas Berdyaev in his several works. The same line is taken by Paul Evdokimov; 'Creation in the biblical sense', he states, 'is like a grain of wheat which brings forth a hundred-fold and never stops developing. 'My Father worketh hitherto and I work also'. Creation is the Alpha moving towards the Omega, and indeed the Omega is already contained within it'. Quoted by John Hick in *Evil and the Love of God*, 1966, 223; cf. *L'Orthodoxie* (Paris; Delachaux et Niestle, 1959, 84).

⁸¹ *The Justification of God*, 1948, 123.