

Wrestling with Creatio Ex Nihilo

We have two theologians, Tertullian and Origen, discussing the idea of creation from matter versus the creation of matter. Tertullian summarizes Hermogenes' point of view on creation ex nihilo, which essentially is that God had to create the universe out of something other than himself—not out of nothing. Origen discusses the creation of matter, and his conclusion is that God created matter, that matter is not uncreated like God.

Tertullian states that God would not “create out of himself; that would be inconsistent with his nature,” and that “matter always existed for God to be always Lord over it” (Tertullian, 155). Origen counters that “it is clear that neither a better material, nor a worse material, could have taken on the forms and species which are in the world” (Origen, 156). To put these statements in simpler terms, Tertullian believes it impossible for God to have created out of nothing or of Himself, and Origen believes that it is impossible for matter to be eternal and pre-existing.

I side with Origen, and not just because of my pre-existing acceptance of creatio ex nihilo. There are a few faults in Tertullian's summary. One is the topic of evil being found in creation; Tertullian states that God cannot create something evil, which is true, but assumes that matter is evil (Tertullian, 155). Firstly, there was no sin or evil when God created humanity. He created us to be perfect, so why would he choose an evil substance to form us? Also, it can be theorized that evil affects matter but is not part of it. We associate evil with matter now, because matter is what we can see, but there is evil in the spiritual realm as well. Also, the claim that “God...could not be father before he had a son” is probably contradictory, because we are told in John 1 that the Word existed eternally with God and later became

flesh [son] (156). Do we know if the Word was “son” before creation, or was He simply “the Word” until Jesus’ birth?

An important question that nobody is asking that keeps running through my head is simply, “Why not? Why wouldn’t God create something out of nothing?” If we bound God by the limits of the physical realm we know so well, being bound by matter and physics because of our existence in them, then He would not be God. We must allow that not everything will be made known to us during our existence on earth. Some things remain as mystery, and God will reveal these things to us at their appointed times. If there is some kind of “rule” or hidden explanation God had to follow in order to create the universe out of nothing, then I’m sure that rule will be made known to us when we reach Heaven.

While most people love to speculate about things like this—as do I on occasion—it is important to account for the things which we do not yet know, rather than be steadfastly sure of our position based on the information we have only now. The most important thing is this: how ever God created the universe, does it affect our salvation? It does not. While it is important to both us and to God, it is not the most important subject to consider.

Resources

Origen, "Origen on Creation from Pre-Existent Matter." In *The Christian Theology Reader*, 4e, edited by Alister E. McGrath, 7-8. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.

Tertullian, "Tertullian on Creation from Pre-Existent Matter." In *The Christian Theology Reader*, 4e, edited by Alister E. McGrath, 7-8. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011.