

Samuel J. Youngs

Creatio Ex Amore Dei: Creation out of Nothing and God's Relational Nature

Abstract

The opinion of many feminist thinkers and process theologians has been that Christianity needs to shed its allegiance to a God conceived in terms of omnipotent sovereignty. As an alternative, many of them have envisioned God in more relational categories, focusing on the metaphysically “limited” nature of God, with the first step along this path often being a refutation of the traditional doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. This essay summarizes such critiques before proceeding to argue that a robust understanding of *creatio ex nihilo*, viewed through the lens of *kenosis*, can actually speak *more* effectively to God’s relational nature and sacrificial love.

Key Words: Creation out of nothing, kenosis, omnipotence, process theology, Jürgen Moltmann

Samuel J. Youngs is currently Instructor of Critical Thought, Bible, and Worldview at Bryan College in Dayton, TN and a Ph.D. student in Theology and Religious Studies at King’s College, University of London. He has published articles and reviews in the following: *Philosophia Christi*, *The Journal of Religious History*, *Reviews in Religion and Theology*, *American Theological Inquiry*, and *The Journal of Comparative Theology*.

Introduction

A billboard down the street from where I teach recently advertised for a Christian ministry seeking to help young people understand what loving relationships ought to look like. Emblazoned in vivid typeface, the billboard asks us to consider the following question: *Is it love, or control?* It is interesting that, in a century sporting an acute resurgence of trinitarian theology, spurred by the likes of Barth and Rahner, we are consistently being pushed to consider a similar question: What is the relationship between God's ability to control the world (via his great power) and God's love for the world?

Trinitarian theology has taught us to view God more relationally and to view ourselves in relational categories as bearers of God's image. The natural sciences and quantum physics present to us a corresponding picture, that all of nature partakes of ecosystems within ecosystems, thriving and changing in the midst of other entities and phenomena. More and more as such study continues we realize that "there is no such thing as solitary life. Contrary to Leibniz's view every monad has many windows, in actual fact it consists only of windows. All living things—each in its own specific way—live in one another and with one another, from one another and for one another" (Moltmann 1985:17). This recognition has illuminated not only our study of humanity, but also of ethics.¹ "Postmodern" philosophy in particular has proclaimed a needed move away from metaphysical dogmatics and binaries, and toward a focus on the actuality of lived, communal personhood. These concerns, among many Christian scholars, have found a home as inspiration for constructive theological work.²

No system or methodology has been more enamored with this vision of an "interrelated" and "organic" reality than process theology. A.N. Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne championed subjective, experiential categories, presenting a relational vision of God that could operate in consonance with scientific discourse (Whitehead 1929; Hartshorne 1976,1978,1982). Process theology's rigorous focus on metaphysics make it an unlikely bedfellow for the anti-ontology strains of postmodern thought, but their mutual concern with "otherness" (alterity), plurality, and dynamism has led to an allegiance of sorts, with scholars like Catherine Keller and David Ray Griffin partaking of post-structuralism, post-colonialism, and process thought in their theological forays (Keller 2002,2011; Griffin

2003). Indeed, the champions of deconstruction and counter-metaphysical speculation—“Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Derrida, and Deleuze”—have now been recognized to “share many points and concerns with Alfred North Whitehead” (Griffin 2003:viii). Schubert Ogden presaged the point, referencing Heideggerian philosophy and Whitehead:

As not only Whitehead, but also Heidegger and others have made clear, the characteristics of classical philosophy all derive from its virtually exclusive orientation away from the primal phenomenon of selfhood toward the secondary phenomenon constituted by the experience of our senses... As soon as we orient our metaphysical reflection to the self as we actually experience it, as itself the primal ground of our world of perceived objects, this whole classical approach is, in the Heideggerian sense of the word, ‘dismantled’ (*destruiert*) (1977:57-58).

Process thought and postmodern theology have had parallel influences on liberation theologies, feminist varieties in particular.³ These voices, though divergent in peripherals, converge over core convictions, namely that the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition has too long been conceived in terms of unbridled power, transcendence, and sovereignty, granting humanity not only an impoverished, tyrannical view of deity, but also of that deity’s relationship to the world. God’s omnipotence, and doctrines relating to it, has come under the most strenuous of the resultant censures. To be sure, our ever-rising awareness and sensitivity to the problem of evil has exacerbated such denunciations of God’s omnipotence (often, understandably, with the intent to shield God from responsibility for the evil in the world), but from process and feminist thinkers in particular, “prevailing concepts of omnipotence are problematic in themselves, even prior to consideration of the problem of evil” (Case-Winters 1990:7).⁴ According to such theologies, this “emperor” vision of God, which Charles Hartshorne termed “classical theism,” must be done away with, along with its attendant doctrines, in particular creation out of nothing (Keller 2003:41-100; Hartshorne 1978:75-80). Indeed: “Process theology [and theologies associated with it] rejects the notion of *creatio ex nihilo*... That doctrine is part and parcel of the doctrine of God as absolute controller” (Cobb & Griffin 1976:65). David Fergusson has likewise remarked that both feminist and process theologies

tend to react directly against aspects of the Judeo-Christian tradition that have over-emphasized God's transcendence (1998:2). Thus, a God whose creative act is defined by power and who creates solely out of his will for the sake of self, is reproached by these perspectives.

These introductory summations serve to ground what I now say, and that is that I *agree* with these thinkers' critique—to a certain extent. If our understanding of creation does not reflect the relational heart of our trinitarian God—in whom “we live and move and have our being”—then we might need to admit that this aspect of our theological reflection stands in need of further development.⁵

But this essay's contention is *not* that God's nature and character are better reflected by a rejection of *creatio ex nihilo*. Rather, I'd like to propose that it is through a theologically nuanced and philosophically attuned understanding of creation out of nothing that God's sacrificial and other-centered, self-giving love may be most clearly seen. Instead of the God of absolute control that process theists so fear, this traditional doctrine might actually be able to open doors for understanding God's relational nature more fully. After all, apart from the cosmological questions there is also the “theological question” of creation: “What does this creation mean for God?” (Moltmann 1985:72). It is this question that will be explored, by arguing that creation out of nothing is a *kenotic act*, and as such exemplifies an affirmation of the other, as well as self-giving love, more deeply and consistently than the alternative views offered by revisionist theologies. In order to consider what such a kenotic view of creation might mean, this paper will investigate and defend some aspects of the notions of “nothing(ness),” “freedom/power,” and “divine self-limitation.”

The Nature of Nothing

As has been argued, convincingly, to my mind, creation out of nothing can be readily derived from biblical texts, conjoined sensibly with other cardinal doctrines, and perceived to underlie the thought of the most significant theological minds (Copan & Craig 2004; Peters 1988; Barth 1960:152f.; Copan 2005; Siniscalchi 2013:678-681), resonating with verve from the writings of Irenaeus, Augustine, Aquinas, and Anselm.⁶ Although the doctrine is nowhere explicitly taught within scripture—as Gerard

May states, “[creation out of nothing] was not demanded by the text of the Bible” (1994:24)— we can affirm that it is, in the words of Jürgen Moltmann, a “fitting” concept for the biblical understanding of creation (1985:74).

But as a conceptual label, the notion only takes us so far: “[It] prompts still other questions. How are we to define this *nihil*, which is supposed to deny and exclude everything that has definition?” (Moltmann 1985:74). How can we theologically render this nothingness? Does such a conception contain anything of substance *to* render? Nothingness, even as a noun, might be etymologically oxymoronic, for to assign an identity to a complete lack of identity certainly seems to be contravening the whole force of the idea. Aquinas’ conception of this nothing was so absolute that it disbarred any idea of “succession or even motion” (Richard 1997:130f.).

We must, it seems, resist the urge to see the pre-existent Godhead as anything other than the *only* thing. In the pre-creation, there was only the immanence of God with Godself—God was not previously existing *anywhere*, for there was *nowhere*, no place, no locus, no anything that was not God, in which he might have been existing. Sergius Bulgakov states of this absolute and total singularity of God’s existence, “It is not even a void, since a void is conceived as a receptacle, that is, as a bounded, concrete being. There is only God, and outside of and apart from God there is nothing, just as there is not even any “outside of” or “apart from.”... *nothing* is a relative concept; it is correlative with *something*, that is, with already existing” (2008:124-125). Fully reflecting on this notion can cause something like intellectual indigestion; it begins to disagree with us. Our words here betray our concepts. For, how can the world “come into being,” if the only being for it to come into is God’s being? If the world is going to be distinct from the creator, as indeed it must if we are going to avoid Hegelianism and process thought,⁷ then the world needs a distinct placement from the creator. Said another way, if the only “spot” for creation is “within” God, since God is all that is, then it would seem that another “spot” would need to be made for that creation to inhabit as a distinct ontological entity from its creator. To preserve the creator-creature distinction, we have to be able to say something about this, or risk total incoherence in our theology of creation—in the face of which revisionist responses may resound their defeat of the *ex nihilo* view.

Moltmann has, in the face of the foregoing dilemma, famously posited the mystical notion of *zimzum*, which he pilfers from Kabbalah as a kind of conceptual tool for understanding the metaphysics of creation. In essence, Moltmann claims that in order to “make room” for creation, God withdraws himself, fences himself off, in order to create a void, a *nihil*, into which creation can be spoken: “The existence of a world outside God is made possible by an inversion of God. This sets free a kind of ‘mystical primordial space’ into which God—issuing out of himself—can enter and in which he can manifest himself.... Creation is preceded by this self-movement of God’s part, a movement which allows creation the space for its own being. God withdraws himself in order to go out of himself” (1985:108-111).⁸

God creates a non-God space by—and here’s the key—*self-limitation*. It is in this light that we can start to perceive creation as a kenotic act on the part of God. Lucien Richard follows Moltmann’s point, saying, “Creation involves a costly process. Creation is an act of kenotic love,” (1997:136) highlighting the difference between this sort of thinking about creation and thinking which focuses solely on God’s transcendence, glory, and omnipotence.⁹ But again, and this is the point, God’s willingness (we might say “desire”) to limit himself by the establishment of an “other” (that is, the created order, an entity utterly distinct from himself) is most thoroughly exemplified by a creation *ex nihilo* perspective. After all, if God were already “one among others,” eternally existing alongside chaos or pre-existent *materia*, then there would be no metaphysical sacrifice to compromise his status as the lone-existing absolute. Indeed, Emil Brunner too recognized that “when God permitted creation, this was the first act of the divine self-humiliation which reached its profoundest point in the cross of Christ” (Moltmann 1985:87; Brunner 1952:20).¹⁰

Now, it should be noted that Moltmann’s articulations of *zimzum* have struck a few as needlessly mystical and apocryphal additions to a “rightly Christian” understanding of creation.¹¹ (I do not know that Moltmann ever expected such reflections to be taken dogmatically, but more as useful intellectual—and possibly metaphorical—tools for understanding.) We should also note that though Moltmann is a compelling theologian of great resource, it has been understood that an understanding of creation as a kenotic act does not necessarily entail his panentheism.

John Polkinghorne, who agrees strongly with the conception of creation as a kenotic act, writes, “The problem [with panentheism] then lies in the danger that such a view compromises the world’s freedom to be itself, which God has given to his creation, and also the otherness that he retains for himself.[...] There are distinctions between God and the world that Christian theology cannot afford to blur” (Polkinghorne 2005:28; also 1996:32). Such qualifications made, we should not miss the core point: a creation out of nothing, understood as power-to-create exercised in love for the sake of another reality, opens up vast theological space for us to talk about a genuine, interactive, and relational heavenly Father.

But this must be understood in its full theological range and significance. In giving rise to and creating in the midst of this *nihil*, God has brought about a not-God reality—which functions, both metaphysically and formally, as a *limitation that God has self-imposed*. Before this moment, *all that was was God*. But then, in the pulsing heart of the creative act, something (the space for creation and creation itself) is birthed which *is not God*. God is now in relationship with something beyond his Godhead; he is related externally, now looking beyond the constitutive relationships of his trinitarian glory toward something else, something *other*. This core insight can be understood as a kind of sacrifice. In engaging in this freely determined act of creating, God not only makes a space where he is not, but gifts the dignity of existence and relationship with the Almighty to another—and in so doing opens himself to the drama of human sinfulness, which eventually leads to the sacrifice of *the cross*, the apex of that sacrificial love that was begun in this primordial moment.¹²

As the apostle Paul tells us, the power of the cross is that strange power, that “foolish,” “low,” “despised,” and “weak” power (1 Corinthians 1:18-29). Indeed, God’s power is not just *exemplified* in weakness, but *made perfect* in it (2 Corinthians 12:9). Yet, as we’ve noted, creation out of nothing is often discussed in terms of exemplifying God’s omnipotence—and roundly critiqued within that light as lauding God’s controlling power at the expense of more relational understandings (Caputo 2006:80-87). As Sally McFague puts it: “Out of nothing’ (*ex nihilo*) is not in Genesis or even in the Bible... Rather, it is an invention of the early church fathers to underscore the transcendence of God. But, we might ask does it also allow for divine immanence, as an adequate model of God and the world

should?” (1993:152).¹³ Such concerns should not be brushed aside. We thus need to examine what a kenotic understanding of creation might mean for our articulations of God’s power.

The Power of God’s Freedom

Per Copan and Craig, creation *ex nihilo* safeguards and promotes three core theological convictions: namely, God’s *aseity*, God’s *freedom*, and God’s *omnipotence* (2004:25-26). All of these have been critiqued to varying degrees by postmodern and process theists, but none have been targeted so stridently as omnipotence (e.g. Hartshorne 1978; Case-Wintes 1990; Griffin 1976). Copan and Craig discuss omnipotence in not unfamiliar terms: “If God desired to create, but could only create out of preexisting matter, then this would place a *limitation* on God” (2004:25). Karl Barth made a similar point:

Creation is the freely willed and executed positing of a reality distinct from God. The question thus arises: What was and is the will of God in doing this? We may reply that he does not will to be alone in His glory; that he desires something else beside Him. But this answer cannot mean that God either willed or did it for no purpose, or that He did so to satisfy a need. Nor does it mean that He did not will to be and remain alone because He could not do so... *In constituting this [created] reality He cannot have set a limit to His glory, will and power* (1958:III.1.231-232).

Everything here from Barth resonates with our kenotic understanding of creation so far... except the last sentence. A kenosis, a sacrifice, a work of real love, would seemingly need to be defined by limitation. The whole logic of God enacting a *particular* reality, and not some other reality, and choosing to work through *certain* individuals at *specific* points in history, indicates that God is actually constantly working in the midst of self-imposed limitations. Such is the logic of any enacted choice—indeed, every freely pursued action both *empowers* in the decision for what is chosen and *limits* in the direction of that reality which is not enacted. Once something is chosen not to be done, then a limit around that action has been erected. This limit

is by no means a negative, and logically it is no diminishment of God's power. It means only that God is limited to do whatever God wants to do in any given situation—thus preventing God from having to do something other than what he wants to do. God's hand cannot be forced; divine activity is completely and utterly free from constraint: "God's almighty power is demonstrated only inasmuch as all the operations of that power are determined by his eternal nature itself. God therefore does what for him is axiomatic—what is divine. In doing this he is entirely free, and in this freedom he is entirely himself. This excludes all forms of duress. But it also does away with any apparent arbitrariness" (Moltmann 1985:76).

The notion of God self-limiting as a matter of divine prerogative is constitutive of the mainstream theological tradition of Christianity. It is even present, perhaps conflictingly, in Barth, who, as we saw, claimed that God imposes no limits on himself, and yet "resolves" to bring about a *particular* world. But this particularity, by virtue of it being a choice, excludes other possible particularities—and, in fact, this self-imposed limitation comes after another such limiting choice: the decision to create at all.¹⁴

[God] determines that he will be the world's Creator... *God* commits himself to create a world. If creation is viewed under the aspect of a divine resolve of will, God's determination that he will be the Creator of a world could already imply a self-limitation on God's part in favor of this particular one of his innumerable possibilities. The Reformed doctrine of decrees presented creation under the aspect of the creative resolve, and Karl Barth developed this (Moltmann 1985:80).

The foregoing discussion, however, is intended to prevent us from saying things like "God's omnipotence means that God is not affected by anything other than God," which contains an illogical force. Although it may strike us as a conceptual difficulty at first, relational limitations are not opposed to God's majesty. Such limitations are sacrificial, but again, a faith articulated in light of the cross would not expect a wide gulf to exist between God's glory and the notion of sacrifice; we must articulate all of our theology in light of "Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death" (Hebrews 2:9-10, see also Luke 24:26; 1 Peter 1:11, 4:13). The importance of such a point can hardly be overstressed.

Now, there is an understandable and quite orthodox suspicion of anything that implies any lack or need in God that originates from outside of God's will. Process thought and related schools often posit such a needy deity: God needed the world in order to be God, or "God would not be God without the world," or sometimes it is even said that the world "completes God." Against this sort of thinking, it is instructive to note that Moltmann critiques the fact that in its rejection of *creatio ex nihilo*, process theology has collapsed the distinction between the created order and the Creator, so that "the theology of nature becomes a divinization of nature" (1985:78-79).¹⁵ Bulgakov is even clearer in his disagreement with such views: "God's freedom in the creation of the world signifies...the absence of a determinate necessity for Him as a need for Him to develop or complete Himself" (2008:120).¹⁶ God has no desperate need to be filled-up by the world—the world is "God's gift" and the universe is "absolutely dependent" on God for its existence (Richard 1997:120).¹⁷

But we can affirm the world's absolute dependence on God and God's sufficiency apart from the world without speaking of creation as a boundless exercise of power. Power of the omnipotent variety is a concept deserving of constructive analysis. For my reading on the subject, Hans Jonas is still the most instructive and challenging:

From the very concept of power, it follows that omnipotence [as traditionally construed] is self-contradictory.... Absolute, total power means power not limited by anything, not even by the mere existence of something other than the possessor of that power; for the very existence of such another would already constitute a limitation, and the one would have to annihilate it so as to save its absoluteness. Absolute power then, in its solitude, has no object on which to act. But as object-less power it is a powerless power, canceling itself out: "all" equals "zero" here.... The existence of another object limits the power of the most powerful agent at the same time that it allows it to be an agent. In brief, power as such is a *relational* concept and requires relation (1987:8).

Arguing aggressively that absolute power without any restriction whatsoever is logically untenable, Jonas claims that relationship both makes sense of

and naturally limits power. It is this truth that Bulgakov claims represents the “metaphysical kenosis” of creation (2008:128).¹⁸ The logical force of this assertion is strong, but shines through even more clearly if we grant that the image of God, not to mention the creation mandate and human responsibility in general, constitute what Terrence Fretheim calls “divine power-sharing,” wherein God’s purposes are carried out in tandem with the willing and acting of human persons (1984:75).¹⁹ God willingly shares his power; all power is God’s to give, but he has gifted his creatures with far more than just existence; he has given them power to act meaningfully within that existence, helping us make sense of St. Paul’s assurance that “we are God’s co-workers” (1 Corinthians 3:9, see also 2 Corinthians 6:1). This biblical underscoring of God’s relational stance toward us affirms that God is not unwilling to work out his purposes with this shared power and influence, granting human beings what C.S. Lewis (quoting Pascal) called “the dignity of causality” (1972:104-107). Recognized in another way by Paul Copan, God’s relational nature means that he is not afraid to work through “inefficient means,” which can be thought of as humans less-than-ideally using the power he has gifted them with (2011:69,165-167). God being entirely free, yet in that freedom choosing to limit himself exemplifies this sacrificial—or kenotic—relation to humanity. It is to this self-limiting capability of the divine freedom that we now turn.

“The Sphere Which God Does Not Overstep”: Divine Self-Limitation

The notion of divine self-limitation (DSL), presented explicitly and implicitly in my two foregoing sections on the relational nature of a kenotic creation, is not without its conceptual and logical difficulties. A robust assessment of such difficulties cannot be broached here, but I will briefly remark on some objections that have come from the revisionist philosophical theologies that have here concerned us.²⁰ Anna Case-Winters and David Ray Griffin will serve as helpful commentators here. Both have written standout works which are critical of divine omnipotence and both are at-home within more revisionist paradigms (feminist and process theology) which have always rejected *creatio ex nihilo*.

Case-Winters finds serious problems with what she calls “classical models” of divine power, for which she takes Calvin as the pre-eminent

example. Not least among her critical points is the fact that “such a[n understanding of omnipotence] makes difficult any concept of genuine *relationship* between God and the world—which in the ordinary meaning of the word would entail mutuality and reciprocity” (1990:92). These points carry considerable weight, and are the same sorts of observations that have led many thinkers (myself included) to value the notion of God’s free self-limitation, which accounts for a more genuine relate-ability to creation.

Looking then to the doctrine of omnipotence as presented by Barth, Case-Winters notes the appearance of the notion that God can limit himself without contradicting his own omnipotence. Barth holds that creation itself was a limitation (as we’ve discussed already; God creates a *particular* world and wills to be “God with us” and “God for us”) insofar as God determines to be in a certain relationship, and no other, to the created order. Case-Winters summarizes, “What this illustrates is that omnipotence, for Barth, does not exclude the possibility of a *voluntary self-limitation of power*” (1990:108). Her critique of these ideas in Barth is two-fold: (1) the notion of God’s self-determination appears to be at odds with Barth’s view of divine atemporality,²¹ and (2) self-limitation does not help with issues like evil, since God’s limitation is self-imposed and thus presumably could be withdrawn at any time in order to vanquish evil.

In David Ray Griffin’s still-definitive work *God, Power, and Evil*, the focus is still the problem of evil, but creation and DSL come up at even regular junctures. Here we will mention his critique of Emil Brunner’s version of DSL. Brunner’s position seems clear enough; God limits himself by creating: “The God of revelation is.... the God who limits Himself, in order to create room for the creature.... The two ideas, Creation and self-limitation, are correlative” (1952:172). Coming as he does from a process perspective, Griffin has obvious disagreements with Brunner. But he is sympathetic to the notion of creaturely existence causing God to limit himself. Unfortunately, Griffin’s analysis unveils in Brunner a wide-ranging and inconsistent development of DSL, so much so that Brunner can rightly be considered a continuation of the “unbridled omnipotence tradition” that only deviates from previous theologians so far as his obfuscating use of DSL rhetoric allows. Brunner is found to be less than helpful, leaving the issues of creation, creaturely freedom, and the problem of evil, looming large:

It seems evident that the only way for theology to meet its responsibility to help people reconcile their beliefs based upon revelation with the “facts which everyone can see,” as Brunner says should be done ([*Dogmatics II*] 151), is to develop or adopt an understanding of divine providential influence which is not total determination. And this means going beyond the issue of semantics (Griffin 1976:230).

In “going beyond the issue of semantics” both Griffin and Case-Winters propose process-influenced models of providence, which necessarily entail a rejection of creation out of nothing and a belief that God cannot determine anything unilaterally, but rather must work through influence and persuasion (Case-Winters 1990:206-232; Griffin 1976: 261-310).

When then is the underlying issue in these critiques of DSL? It seems that in both Barth and Brunner, process and feminist commentators have not found incoherence in the notion of DSL as such; what they have pinpointed instead is a lack of consistency within theological outlooks that lay claim to DSL. Case-Winters finds divine timelessness and DSL to be inconsistent,²² and Griffin detects too many different vocabularies at work in Brunner for DSL to truly be considered his governing paradigm.

These critiques are effective, and in both cases are so tightly bound to the texts of both Barth and Brunner that they are nigh irrefutable. But they are both addressed to doctrinal and rhetorical lynchpins, which, fortunately, do not bind our current exploration. Divine atemporality is not a necessary part of an orthodox doctrine of God, and indeed has come under critique from thoroughly orthodox philosophers like Nicholas Wolterstorff (2001:187-213) and others. In fact, and highly pertinent for our discussion here, Thomas Senor has convincingly demonstrated that a temporal conception of God meshes quite effectively with a creation *ex nihilo* framework (1993:86-92). Brunner’s issue, that of inconsistency, though always a risk when doing theology, seems well-resisted by Hans Jonas clear articulation of power-as-power-in-relation and the thoroughgoing kenotic model of Moltmann and others. Discussed apart from entangling notions like atemporality, and worked out consistently, creation out of nothing by way of God’s willing self-limitation appears to be a workable and fruitful theological expression.

Conclusion: Triune and Relational Kenosis

First John tells us “God is love” (4:8). Following from what we have said so far, it can be concluded that God would *still* be love without the created order. This is a crucial distinction between the framework advocated in this essay and process theology. The inter-trinitarian love of God has often been articulated in terms of *perichoresis*, understood commonly as that “mutual indwelling” among the persons of the Godhead which intones their unbreakable communion, fellowship, and alliance of will. God’s essence is thus both loving and other-affirming, insofar as each person of the Trinity affirms and loves the other persons. Thomas Thompson and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. write, “Few are the major statements on the Trinity today that do not find in [the statement] ‘God is love’ a most compelling description of and entrance into God’s trinitarian being and action in history” (2006:173).

Several theologians over the past century have promoted the idea that the only coherent way to articulate such an outlook on the Trinity is to understand *perichoresis* as a *kenotic* interchange among the three persons. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit embody perfect sacrifice and self-giving love, allowing each others’ will to, essentially, be their own will; the perfect example of divine power that expresses itself most clearly in loving, but limiting, relationship. “I came down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38)—Bulgakov very effectively highlights this example, among others, of Christ kenotically willing in tandem with the Father’s will, thus offering us a picture of the trinitarian relations (2008:283-285).

In what does the limiting love of Trinitarian relations consist? We can actually perceive them in even the most simplistic formulations of the Trinity: “God is the Father, is the Son, and is the Holy Spirit. The Father *is not* the Son, the Son *is not* the Spirit, the Spirit *is not* the Father.” Every iteration of “is not” constitutes a relational, and positive, limit. Thus the three persons of the Trinity could be said to kenotically indwell one another in the divine life, but do so by willing self-limitation.²³

This understanding of God’s immanent, relational nature helps us recognize creation out of nothing not only as a demonstration of his power, but also as a revelation of his character. Just as God the Son embraces

kenosis in his human incarnation, willingly submits himself to the will of the Father, and sacrifices himself for the sake of sinful others,²⁴ so too does the trinitarian act of creation reveal God's willingness to sacrifice, and in that sacrifice bring about true relationship.

What is thus ironic about theological critiques of *creatio ex nihilo* (whether they arise from process, feminist, or other theological outlooks) is their failure to realize that—if understood in terms of kenosis and God's free self-limitation—creation out of nothing points to a God who is more relational, more loving, more other-affirming, than what we find within the proposed alternative conceptions. We do not see in creation the tyrannical emperor God of revisionist theology's caricature; instead we see a Creator who in his very act of creating precludes the servanthood of Christ and who gives all good gifts to his creation (Moltmann 1985:78,88).²⁵

And, on the other side, rather than reducing God, making God weak, or collapsing his sovereignty, a kenotic understanding of *creatio ex nihilo* opens the door for understanding God's power as power-within-relationship, power that is gifted to God's image bearers wherein “the selflessness of love reflects vulnerability, a giving of power to the beloved” (Wisniewski 2003:11). The world in its brokenness only understands power in terms of domination and control, but God's wisdom makes this wisdom into foolishness: the sacrificial power of love serves as a basis for both the creation and redemption of the world, and this overcomes all other alleged powers (Matera 1999:93-95).

God is absolutely free, and in his freedom he willingly creates a world from nothing, and in that creative act enters into a relationship with that world. Thus, we can say that it is true, yet not enough, to say that God “created out of nothing.” And it is also true, yet not enough, to say that God “created out of freedom.” We must to both of these add: “for the sake of love.”

Endnotes

¹ Buber's *I and Thou* and Levinas' *Otherwise than Being* are representative, and now classic, articulations of the ethical imperative that is leveraged by such an understanding of self and “other.”

² For exemplary theological work being done in direct dialogue with such concerns, see the series of essays: James Smith & Henry Isaac Venema, eds. *The Hermeneutics of Charity: Interpretation, Selfhood, and Postmodern Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004); for other examples across the theological spectrum see Amos Yong's *Hospitality and the Other* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), focusing on Christian practice and pluralism; Mary Fulkerson, *Places of Redemption: Theology for a Worldly Church* (Oxford, 2007), focusing on ecclesiology); Tina Beattie, *Theology after Postmodernity: Divining the Void—A Lacanian Reading of Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford, forthcoming [2013]), focusing on historical theology and Thomistic themes; and Jan-Olav Henriksen, *Desire, Gift, and Recognition: Christology and Postmodern Philosophy* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2009).

³ “The widespread influence of Whitehead on feminism in North America reflects a disjunctive but analogous attraction to a language that honors its own poetic edges, where women find expressive options beyond emulation of the andromorphic subject or surrender to objectification,” in Keller, “The Process of Difference, the Difference of Process,” in Keller, *Process and Difference*, 28n.37. See also Ellen K. Feder *et al.*, eds. *Derrida and Feminism: Recasting the Question of Woman* (London: Routledge, 1997).

⁴ David Ray Griffin makes a similar point, detailing what he says as the problematic dimensions of theology articulated in light of God's omnipotence. See *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004 ed. [1976]), esp. chapters 17 and 18.

⁵ This statement might be challenged by those of strongly Reformed persuasions who wish to maintain God only ever does anything for himself—or for his “glory.” To those with such objections, another full-blown essay, or perhaps a book, would be in order to make some significant counter-points. I will here broach two initial thoughts: (1) Logically, there is no contradiction between God creating “for himself” and creating “for the sake of the created”—God's creative acting is perfectly capable of shouldering both aspects; they are not in contradiction to one another, especially if one has a robust understanding of the *imago Dei* in which humanity reflects aspects of God and furthers God's own mission (and thus, God's own glory). (2) I would make reference to the following, which have done admirable jobs explicating different dimensions of God's role as generous giver for the sake of others: Terrence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Fortress Press, 1984), esp. Ch. 9; Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Broadman and Holman/Eerdmans Publishing, 2000 [1994]), 99-108. Kelly Kapic has presented an accessible (and Reformed) perspective which affirms that though God is the ultimate free cause of creation, the creation was birthed in order to allow human beings to participate in fellowship with God and to celebrate the goodness of his world. These things may glorify God, but the world was not created solely “for God”—as Kapic states, “God's ownership [of creation] is much more dynamic than we might expect... God does not own by keeping, but by giving” (*For God So Loved, He Gave: Entering the Movement of Divine Generosity* (Zondervan, 2011), 24, see further 17-29).

⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Chs. 17-18; Augustine, *City of God*, Book XI, Chs. 4-6; Anselm, *Proslogion*, Ch. 5; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 44-49. Cf. Richard, *Christ the Self-Emptying of God*, 128-132. Further, “Creation in the Judeo-Christian tradition cannot have any preceding condition; it cannot follow on anything else. In its uniqueness it is in every respect ‘for the first time’” (*ibid.*, 128-29).

⁷ And emanationism and pantheism, for good measure.

⁸ Moltmann makes this point even more succinctly and cogently in his “God’s Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World,” in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 137ff., esp. 144-148.

⁹ This is not to say that all three of these more “monarchical” attributes of God cannot be understood relationally based on the biblical witness. However, the *ways* in which such things appear in traditional Christian discourse do on occasion reduce the other-affirming nature of God’s *agape* for creation.

¹⁰ See also the forceful articulation of these themes in George Hendry, “Nothing,” *Theology Today* 39.3 (1982): 287-288: “Creation...implies a certain self-limitation, or self-negation on the part of God. God as being does not wish to monopolize the whole of being, he does not regard it as an inalienable prerogative; he relinquishes some of it to another....”

¹¹ Paul R. Sponheim says that it only seems to add “another layer of mystery” with little constructive value (*The Pulse of Creation: God and the Transformation of the World* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999], 20). Chan Ho Park has recently offered some of the best examinations of Moltmann’s pantheism and related motifs, giving a thoroughgoing but fair critical evaluation in his *Transcendence and Spatiality of the Triune Creator* (Peter Lang, 2005), esp. 118-123.

¹² “Now we being to see what a large measure of self-limitation He has imposed upon Himself, and how far He has emptied Himself... [when] a creature which has misused its creaturely freedom to such an extent as to defy God. The *kenosis*, which reaches its paradoxical climax in the Cross of Christ, began with the Creation of the world” Brunner, *Dogmatics II*, 20. Moltmann builds on this notion to tie together a multitude of themes: In creating, God first creates a nothingness, a non-God space, in which creation exists. This non-God space would be completely devoid of God, and thus would be rightly considered death, hell, non-being, etc. It is in the midst of that space that God brings about creation. And after his creation falls into sin, turning toward non-God reality, it is Christ who will embrace the non-being of sin and death for the sake of that broken creation. Christ’s sacrificial plunge *back into* nothingness thus inaugurates a “new” creation, mirroring the initial kenotic act of *creatio ex nihilo* by the kenosis on the cross. (See *God in Creation*, 91-93.) Though there can be, and often are, disagreements with Moltmann’s overall program, the constructive theological horizon opened by such a formulation is fascinating.

¹³ It should be noted that McFague is careful to use “model” as the designation for her more pantheistic view of the God-world relationship, thus sparing herself from defending any position dogmatically. She is, however, resolute in her denunciation of creation out of nothing.

¹⁴ We may balk at this “decision” or “enacting” language, and some have argued that creation is actually something intrinsic to the nature of the Creator God. Such a line of reasoning problematically, and quite directly, leads us to any number of Neo-Platonic emanationist paradigms (Moltmann offers Paul Tillich as a representative of this trajectory [*God in Creation*, 80]).

¹⁵ Admittedly, Moltmann's work presented some ambiguity on this score, see the incisive comments by Chan Ho Park, *Transcendence and Spatiality*, 108-112. Critiques of Moltmann focusing majorly on his panentheism are also informative here: see, e.g., Henri Blocher, *Evil and the Cross: An Analytic Look at the Problem of Pain* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1994), 72-76; John W. Cooper, *Panentheism: The Other God of the Philosophers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 237-258.

¹⁶ *The Lamb of God*, 120. Though he critiques Schelling's and Hegel's viewpoints here, Bulgakov goes on to argue, along a different route, that God could not have chosen not to create (120ff.). This point, similar to how it is made by Moltmann, seems to be that as Creator, God's creative love compels him to creative acts. This is not born of any need, but of an essential and voluntary movement.

¹⁷ Richard, *Christ the Self-Emptying of God*, 130-131. Language, however, might be a stumbling block here. Paul Fiddes has recently attempted to articulate how God's "needs" might be "satisfied" by a loving relationship with the world without implying any "deficiency in God" or "limit on divine freedom" ("Creation Out of Love," in Polkinghorne, 169ff.). Whether or not Fiddes' argument succeeds is an open question, but it represents an important attempt to claim such language within a more orthodox framework than process theology.

¹⁸ The full passage read: "The creation of heaven and earth...is, in relation to Divinity itself, a voluntary self-diminution, a metaphysical kenosis. Alongside His *absolute* being, God establishes a *relative* being with which he enters into an interrelation, being God and Creator for this being. The creative 'let there be,' which is the command of God's omnipotence, at the same time expresses the sacrifice of Divine love, of God's love for the world," (*The Lamb of God*, 128).

¹⁹ Further, "God's Word and action are certainly indispensable, but the future of the created order is made dependent in significant ways upon the creaturely use of power. This, of course, entails a self-limitation with respect to divine sovereignty..." (74).

²⁰ There are also notable critiques of DSL from more traditional theological perspectives; e.g. Ron Highfield, "The Function of Divine Self-Limitation in Open Theism: Great Wall or Picket Fence?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. 45/2 (June 2002): 279-99; idem., "Divine Self-Limitation in the Theology of Jürgen Moltmann: A Critical Appraisal," *Christian Scholar's Review*, Vol. 32.1 (Fall 2002): 49-71. I sadly lack the space to address Highfield's brand of concerns in this essay, but hope to pursue them in future work.

²¹ She incisively asks, "*Who*, in fact, *was there* making the choice to be 'with and for' the human being? Such choice would have to have been made by some *other* nature not characterized by this limitation" (*God's Power*, 108, emphasis in original). She further notes that the determination, to be made coherent at all, must introduce a "before" and "after" into God.

²² Case-Winters, as noted above, also thinks that DSL, incoherently, could be withdrawn at any time in order to conquer evil. This is an odd critique, since the prerogative to withdraw the limitation, when exercised, would contradict the intentions of said limitation; if the limitation is real, then withdrawing it, though within the scope of divine power, would clearly not be within the scope of the divine willing. The vanquishing of evil is apparently willed by God to proceed along other

lines, rather than his unilateral annihilation of it. Furthermore, the withdrawing of DSL, if it is DSL that allows creation “to be” in the first place, would constitute not only the destruction of evil in the universe, but also the whole of the created order itself.

²³ On the notion of kenosis and love in the midst of this social perichoresis, see Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 158-176; Bulgakov, *The Lamb of God*, 264ff. Obviously, much of this discussion will be challenged at the outset by those opposed to social trinitarian models. I have not the space to articulate a full defense of such models here, but see Thompson and Plantinga, “Trinity and Kenosis,” 172-189, see also J. Scott Horrell, “Toward a Biblical Model of the Social Trinity,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* Vol. 47.3 (September 2004): 399–421; also Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2000 ed.), 65-76, and Miroslav Volf *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Eerdmans, 1998), esp. 76ff.

²⁴ Kenotic christology has seen a remarkable renaissance in the last decade, and that renaissance has served as part of the impetus of this present study. Two of the most significant works demonstrating both the theological acumen of kenoticism’s supporters and the myriad fields of theology which it informs are: (1) C. Stephen Evans, ed., *Exploring Kenotic Christology* (Oxford University Press, 2006), and (2) David Brown, *Divine Humanity: Kenosis and the Construction of a Christian Theology* (Baylor University Press, 2011). See also the inter-disciplinary work by Jeffrey Keuss, *Freedom of the Self: Kenosis, Cultural Identity, and Mission at the Crossroads* (Wipf & Stock, 2010). Moltmann’s *The Crucified God* and Bulgakov’s *The Lamb of God* remain powerful contemporary interpretations with wide influence.

²⁵ I have called upon Moltmann’s thought throughout this paper, but I do so critically. Moltmann’s “broad place” in theological dialogue allows his articulate theological innovativeness to lend itself to appropriation by disparate positions, and his thought certainly morphed over time and through his interactions with various schools and thinkers.

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