Ex Nihilo: The Development of the Doctrines of God and Creation in Early Christianity

Keith Norman

> Many men say there is one God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost are only one God! I say that is a strange God anyhow —three in one, and one in three! It is a curious organization. "Father, I pray not for the world, but I pray for them which Thou hast given me." "Holy Father, keep through Thine own name those which Thou hast given me, that they may be one as we are." John 17:9,11. All are to be crammed into one God, according to sectarianism. It would make the biggest God in all the world. He would be a wonderfully big God—He would be a giant or a monster. . . .[1]

Joseph Smith's caricature of the creedal mire in which orthodox Christianity has been stuck for so long, although apparently based on the sixth-century Athanasian Creed,[2] is indicative of the confusion and misunderstanding which attempts to explain the Godhead by esoteric philosophical formulation have engendered. Although most Christian denominations officially subscribe to one or another

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[1]Joseph Smith, Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 6:476. (Cited hereafter as *HC.*)

[2]The origin of this most orthodox Catholic creed is obscure; it was ascribed to Athanasius after the ninth century, although much closer to Augustine in wording and thought. The first part is as follows: "Whosoever will be saved: before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith: Which Faith except everyone do keep whole and undefiled: without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.

"And the Catholic Faith is this:

"That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the Persons: nor dividing the Substance. For there is one Person of the Father: another of the Son: and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one: the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is: such is the Son: and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreate: the Son uncreate: and the Holy Ghost uncreate. The Father incomprehensible: the Son incomprehensible: and the Holy Ghost incomprehensible. The Father eternal: the Son eternal: and the Holy Ghost eternal.

"And yet there are not three eternals: but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated, not three incomprehensibles, but one uncreated and one incomprehensible [Latin *immensus*]. So likewise the Father is Almighty: the Son Almighty: and the Holy Ghost Almighty. And yet they are not three Almighties: but one Almighty. So the Father is God: the Son is God: and the Holy Ghost is God. And

of the various creeds proclaiming "the Mystery of Trinity in Unity," the doctrine is like Einstein's theory of relativity: only the most learned and able minds are capable of really understanding it in any depth. This leaves the orthodox Christian with no choice but to profess belief in something he does not and probably cannot comprehend, since, as Cyril Richardson mused on "The Enigma of the Trinity," "It has been observed that by denying it one may be in danger of losing one's soul, while by trying to understand it one may be in danger of losing one's wits."[3]

How did the Christian Church come to accept such a complicated and unscriptural article of faith? This study will attempt to show that the basis of this fundamental departure from the simplicity of faith in a personal God who is our Heavenly Father, and in his son Jesus Christ, is the consequence or corollary of the development of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*; i.e., God alone is uncreated and eternal, while all else—mankind, angels, other living things, and matter itself—was created by God out of nothing, *ex nihilo,* and is thus of an entirely different order of being from the Creator.

THE CREATOR/CREATURE DICHOTOMY

The culmination of the long process of doctrinal development and philosophical speculation in early Christianity, at least in the Western Church, lies in the definitive corpus of the writings of St. Augustine, whose famous conversion occurred in 386. He became *the* authority for generations of Catholics and Protestants, and one still finds no rival to Augustine's reputation and influence who does not depend upon him far more than he might venture

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yet they are not three Gods: but one God. So likewise the Father is Lord: the Son Lord: and the Holy Ghost Lord. And yet not three Lords: but one Lord.

"For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord: so are we forbidden by the Catholic Religion: to say, there are three Gods, or three Lords.

"The Father is made of none: neither created, nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone: not made, nor created: but begotten. The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son: neither made, nor created, nor begotten: but proceeding.

"So there is one Father, not three Fathers: one Son, not three Sons: one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts. And in this Trinity none is afore, or after another: none is greater, or less than another. . . . But the whole three Persons are coeternal, and coequal. So that in all things, as aforesaid: the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity, is to be worshipped.

"He therefore that will be saved, must thus think of the Trinity.

(See Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom,* 3 vols. [New York: Harper and Brothers, 1877], 2:66ff.)

[3]Cyril C. Richardson, "The Enigma of the Trinity," in *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine,* ed. Roy W. Battenhouse (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 235.

to contravene him. His *De Trinitate,* on which the Athanasian Creed is based,[4] is the classic statement of the trinitarian position; but the theme of a God who is transcendent, unchanging, and incomprehensible runs throughout his writings. "Nothing can be said that is worthy of God. We seek for a fitting name but do not find it."[5] For Augustine it is impossible for any man to know God, or even any of his attributes, for man is entirely different from his Maker and exists on a completely different plane of reality. The only reliable information about God is negative—what he is not.[6] God is, by philosophical definition, incomprehensible to the mind or senses of man, and it is impious to assert any direct knowledge of him.[7]

By Augustine's time it was well established among Christian writers in both East and West that existence in the full sense belonged to God alone,[8] and he affirmed that all creation, being changeable and corruptible, cannot have "true being":

> Anything whatsoever, no matter how excellent, if it be mutable has not true *being,* for true being is not to be found where there is also *non-being.*[9]

In the words of the modern theologian Paul Tillich, God is not *a* being, but *being-itself.*[10] God transcends every being and the totality of beings. He is *totaliter aliter*—"wholly other." In philosophical terms, God has "necessary being" but man has only "contingent being"; his existence is totally dependent upon the will of God. Man, a "creature," is like every other created thing, whether animal, vegetable, mineral, or even spirit: not only does his initial existence stem from the creative fiat of God, but his continued existence is sustained only by God's active will. Before the divine creative activity, man (and all else) did not exist, either as individual entities or as unorganized matter. Man had

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[4]G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1936), p. 152. See also J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950), p. 273.

[5]Augustine, *Tractate on the Gospel of John* 13.5, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers,* ed. Philip Schaff, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1956), 7:89. (Cited hereafter as *NPNF-1.*)

[6]Augustine, *Discourses on the Psalms* 85, in *Patrologiae Latina,* ed. J. P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris: n.p., 1865), 37:1090. (Cited hereafter as *PL.*)

[7]Augustine, *Sermons* 117.3.5, in *PL,* 38:663.

[8]John F. Callahan, *Augustine and the Greek Philosophers* (Villanova, Pa.: Villanova University Press, 1967), p. 18.

[9]Augustine, *Tractate on the Gospel of John,* 18.10, in *NPNF-1,* 7:220.

[10]Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology,* 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-63), 1:235.

an absolute beginning and, should God cease to will his existence, will have an end.

In its doctrine of God and man, then, mainstream Christianity has postulated two radically different orders of existence or planes of reality, with a firm ontological line drawn between them—a radical gulf of essential being which forever separates the Divine from the human, the Creator from the created.

> There is no greater sense of distance than that which lies in the words Creator-Creation. Now this is the first and the fundamental thing which can be said about man: He is a creature, and as such he is separated by an abyss from the Divine manner of being. The greatest dissimilarity between two things which we can express at all—more dissimilar than light and darkness, death and life, good and evil—is that between the Creator and that which is created.[11]

Although this statement by the neoorthodox theologian Emil Brunner would be considered extreme by some, it is merely the logical outcome of such official pronouncements as the Westminister Confession of Faith of the Anglican Church (1647), and the Dogmatic Constitution of the Catholic Faith, adopted by the First Vatican Council in 1870, which insists that God "is to be declared as really and essentially distinct from the world," which is created out of nothing.[12]

Mormonism, on the other hand, in one of its most radical departures from traditional Christian orthodoxy, proclaims that man and God are of the same race, that God is a personal being with a physical body and literally our Eternal Father, and that we also are eternal beings without essential beginning or ultimate end.[13] Not only has mankind always existed as intelligence "in the beginning with God," but matter itself is eternal (D&C 93:23, 33). It cannot be created or made *per se,* only organized or formed into specific material entities.

"CREATION" IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Consequently Joseph Smith took issue with the standard translation and interpretation of the opening verse in the Bible: "In

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[11]Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology,* trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1947), p. 90.

[12]See Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom,* 3:606ff and 2:239.

[13]Two excellent treatments of this are in Sterling M. McMurrin, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1965), pp. 49ff. and Truman G. Madsen, *Eternal Man* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1966), pp. 23ff. *et passim.*

the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."[14] Although the Hebrew word *bara'*, here translated *created,* is usually reserved in the Old Testament for God's activity in forming the world and all things in it, synonymous terms and phrases scattered throughout the Hebrew scriptures take the force out of any attempt to use this fact as evidence that an *ex nihilo* creation is being described in Genesis 1. The most common of these synonyms are *yāṣar,* to shape or form,[15] and *'āśāh,* to make or produce.[16] In a study of the Hebrew conception of the created order, Luis Stadelmann insists that both *bārā',* and *yāṣar* carry the anthropomorphic sense of fashioning, while *'āśāh* connotes a more general idea of production.[17] Throughout the Old Testament the image is that of the craftsman fashioning a work of art and skill, the potter shaping the vessel out of clay, or the weaver at his loom.[18] The heavens and the earth are "the work of God's hand."[19] Thus Joseph Smith, who had studied Hebrew, preferred to translate the verb *bārā'* as "to organize."[20]

Although apparently the Prophet in this instance was speaking primarily from the standpoint of scholarship rather than the direct word of the Lord, contemporary theologians, committed to the *ex nihilo* position, would have rejected his analysis out of hand. Since his day, however, the influence of biblical critics, combined with the canons of modern physics, have taken their toll on the orthodox position, while vindicating the Latter-day Saint interpretation. Frank M. Cross concludes that it was the creation *ex nihilo* tradition which prompted the translation of Genesis 1:1 found in the King James and similar versions. According to *The Interpreter's Bible,* the Hebrew *b^{e}rē' šît* would more properly be rendered "In the beginning of" rather than simply "In the beginning."[22] Thus the first verse of Genesis does not stand apart from the following narrative as a kind of summarizing prelude, but merges natur-

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[14]*HC,* 6:475.

[15]Genesis 2:7, 8, 19; Isaiah 27:11; 43:1; 45:7; Jeremiah 1:5; 10:16.

[16]Genesis 2:3; 3:11; Job 36:3; Isaiah 45:7. Note especially Isaiah 45:18, where *yāsar* and *'āśāh* immediately follow and clarify *bārā'*.

[17]Luis I. J. Stadelmann, *The Hebrew Conception of the World* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1970), p. 5.

[18]Isaiah 29:16; 40:22; 45:9; 51:13,15,16; Psalms 74:13-17; 89:11; 90:2. Cf. Romans 9:20.

[19]Psalms 102:25; 8:3.

[20]*HC,* 6:475.

[21]Class lecture notes, Harvard University, September 1972.

[22]I.e., the construct state. Literally, "In the beginning of God's creating. . . ." See Cuthbert A. Simpson, "The Book of Genesis: Introduction and Exegesis," in *The Interpreter's Bible,* 12 vols. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1952-57), 1:466.

ally with verse two, and we might correctly translate, as E. A. Speiser suggests, "When God set about to create heaven and earth, the world being then a formless waste. . . ,"[23] or, as Cross renders it (subscribing to the theory of the higher critics that Genesis 1:2 is a later addition), "When God began to create the heaven and the earth, then God said, 'Let there be light.' "[24] The traditional translation of Genesis 1:1 as an independent statement, implying that God first created matter out of nothing, and *then* (verses 2ff.) proceeded to fashion the world from that raw material, is now widely questioned,[25] and several recent translations have adopted the approach advocated by Speiser and Cross.[26]

The King James translation of Genesis 1:2, which renders the Hebrew as "void," has also lent support to the creation *ex nihilo* theory, whereas actually the word always occurs in the Old Testament in tandem with *tohû* ("formless"), describing a "formless waste," or the "chaos" common to Near Eastern creation mythology.[27] In the last analysis it is this association of Genesis 1 with the ubiquitous creation stories of antiquity which decidedly rules out creation *ex nihilo* as the idea behind the biblical text. The earth was *tohû wabohû*: "without form and void," as the Authorized (King James) Version renders it, "and darkness was upon the face of the deep (*tehôm*)," i.e., the watery chaos (cf. 2 Peter 3:5). This hardly signifies absolute nonexistence; rather it speaks of the formless, primeval chaotic matter, the *Urstoff* out of which the Creator fashioned the world.[28] Hermann Gunkel called this chaos of Genesis 1 "ein uralter Zug," which apparently

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[23]E. A. Speiser, *Genesis,* vol. 1, *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), p. 3.

[24]Class lecture notes, Harvard University, September 1972.

[25]Hermann Gunkel, *Schöpfung und Chaos in Urzeit und Endzeit* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1897), p. 7, n. 3; cf. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis,* trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), p. 49, and esp. p. 46: ". . . the notion of a created chaos is . . . a contradiction."

[26]Simpson, *Genesis, Interpreter's Bible,* 1:466. Other modern versions which incorporate this usage include *The New Jewish Version*: "When God began to create the heaven and the earth, the earth being unformed and void. . . ."; similarly *The Bible, An American Translation* (1931); *The Westminster Study Edition of the Holy Bible* (1948); Moffat's translation (1935); and the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV), alternate reading.

[27]Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 26. Cf. von Rad, *Genesis,* p. 49: " 'Tohuwabohu' means the formless; the primeval waters over which darkness was superimposed characterizes the chaos materially as a watery primeval element, but at the same time gives a dimensional association: t^{e}hom ('sea of chaos') is the cosmic abyss. . . . This damp primeval element, however, was agitated by a divine storm (cf. Daniel 7:2). . . . This declaration, then, belongs completely to the description of chaos and does not yet lead into the creative activity. . . ."

[28]See von Rad, *Genesis,* p. 49.

has an independent existence, however shadowy.[29] Thus, concludes C. H. Dodd, "the Mosaic account of creation postulates two pre-existent factors—the eternal God, and Chaos."[30] Even a modern Catholic theologian can no longer maintain "that the first Genesis account expressly teaches that God created all things out of nothing. The notion of 'nothing' was unimaginable to the unsophisticated author."[31] Just as elsewhere in the Old Testament, when the Lord God "laid the foundations of the earth," his command brought response from the elements rather than effecting existence as such (Psalms 104:5-9; cf. Isaiah 48:13), so also, admits Gerhard von Rad, in Genesis 1 "the actual concern of this entire report of creation is to give prominence, form and order to the creation out of chaos,"[32] i.e., unorganized, chaotic matter. Accordingly, Speiser, after an extensive analysis of the Hebrew in the first verses of Genesis, is forced to concede in a guarded, roundabout statement: "To be sure my interpretation precludes the view that the creation accounts say nothing about coexistent matter."[33] That is, Speiser, against his orthodox tradition, must interpret Genesis 1 as describing the creation by God out of preexisting matter, not *ex nihilo.*

In fact the Old Testament account of the creation, from Genesis 1 and consistently throughout,[34] supports the radical departure of Joseph Smith and Mormonism from the orthodox *ex nihilo* dogma. God fashioned or organized the heavens and the earth from existing material and not "out of nothing," and though God is far above man in his righteousness, perfection, and glory he formed man "in His own image and likeness."[35] This personal,

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[29]Gunkel, *Shöpfung und Chaos,* p. 7. Gunkel refutes Wellhausen's assertion (n. 3) "that Chaos was created by God in the beginning according to Genesis 1; this is untenable; the 'heaven and earth' is the *organized* world."

[30]C. H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* (London: Hodder &. Stoughton, 1935), p. 103.

[31]Robert Butterworth, *The Theology of Creation,* no. 5 of *Theology Today* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), p. 37.

[32]von Rad, *Genesis,* p. 47. This is a concession, since von Rad tries to establish an *ex nihilo* creation by the priority of vs. 1 over vs. 2.

[33]Speiser, *Genesis,* p. 13.

[34]E.g., Isaiah 5:30; Psalms 64:8; 76:17-18; 92:3-4; Jeremiah 5:22; 38:16.

[35]Although a discourse on Genesis 1:26-7 is not within the scope of this study, the comment of von Rad (*Genesis,* p. 56) deserves notice here: "The interpretations, therefore, are to be rejected which proceed from an anthropology strange to the Old Testament and one-sidedly limit God's image to man's spiritual nature, relating it to man's 'dignity,' his 'personality' or 'ability for moral decision,' etc. The marvel of man's bodily appearance is not at all to be excepted from the realm of God's image. . . . The whole man is created in God's image." Claus Westerman, *Creation,* trans. John J. Scullion (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), p. 57, discusses the movement among biblical scholars to describe man as the image of God in *appearance,*

anthropomorphic, actively-working God is vastly different from the one of the creeds and the theologians, and belief in this kind of a Father-Creator brought at least as much contempt from sophisticated thinkers in the early Christian period as it does today.[36]

EARLY CHRISTIANITY AND THE CREATOR

Early Christianity grew up in a scene far removed from that of the Hebrew prophets. It was a world saturated by Greek culture and ideas even more than it was dominated by Roman politics, and Jewish resistance to this foreign influence had been gradually breaking down. One of the most conspicuous examples of this is the Septuagint, the translation of the Old Testament into Greek, traditionally attributed to seventy Jewish elders in Alexandria. This work reflected the disdain of Greek intellectuals for the *demiourgoi,* or craftsmen, who were looked down on as the lowest order of society.[37] Even the artist who created a great work was differentiated from his achievement, and its "creator" remained an object of contempt.[38] Aristotle pointed out that this applies to the demiurge of the cosmos,[39] and thus the Septuagint, when referring to God as the Creator, avoided forms of the word *demiourgos* in favor of the verb *ktidzō* and its derivatives. Homer, however, had used *ktidzō* in the sense of "to build" or "establish" a city, and the word still carried its architectural connotation into New Testament times, despite our translation of *ktidzō* as simply "to create."[40] Nevertheless, it was a step removed from the anthropomorphic craftsman

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beginning with Hermann Gunkel, P. Humber, Ludwig Köhler and J. J. Stamm. In criticizing this interpretation Christiaan Vriezen objected that the Old Testament is not aware of a body/spirit dualism; man is a unity. But of course this sword cuts both ways: an exclusive "spiritualized" interpretation of Genesis 1:26-27 cannot be upheld on Vriezen's principle: the visual, bodily image and likeness must be included.

[36]See especially the ridicule of the second-century philosopher Celsus in Origen's *Against Celsus* 4.37.71; 6.60ff; 7.27, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers,* ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 24 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1956), 4:513, 529, 600ff., and 621 respectively. (Cited hereafter as *ANF.*) Origen's "defense," written almost a century later, consisted in reinterpreting the Bible on a more philosophical level: only the simpleminded would take such passages literally.

[37]See Plutarch, *Theseus,* 25, and *Pol.,* 3.4. As cited by Werner Foerster, "Κτίζω," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament,* ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromley, 9 vols. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), 3:1024.

[38]Plutarch, *Pericles,* 2, in ibid., 3:1024.

[39]Aristotle, *On the Procreation of the Soul in Plato's Timaeus,* in *Theological Dictionary,* 3:1024. Plato's Demiurge, which remarkably resembles the "Word" (logos) in John 1:1-14, was the maker of the world (out of preexistent eternal material). See Plato's *Timaeus* 27d-29e, 53a-56c.

[40]Foerster, in *Theological Dictionary,* 3:1025. However, the Septuagint's rendition of the Hebrew *tohû wabohû* in Genesis 1:2 as *aoratos kai akataskeuastos* (unseen and unfurnished) "probably meant to suggest the creation of the visible world out of preexistent invisible elements" (Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks,* p. 111).

image of creation, and provided a foothold for later advocates of an *ex nihilo* interpretation.

It is important, however, to observe that the Jewish doctrine of creation was not highly developed in a technical sense at the beginning of the Christian era. Divine creation was an assumption rather than an assertion: both Christian and Jewish writings reveal belief in the Almighty God, the sovereign Lord of all creation, without speculating on the nature of the act of creation itself.[41] But there are indications in the intertestamental literature of a tendency to speak with greater clarity on the refinements of theological issues. In the Wisdom of Solomon 11:17 we read of God's hand which "created the world out of unformed matter (*ktisasa ton kosmon ex amorphou hylēs*)," but 2 Maccabees 7:28 had already affirmed of the heavens and earth, that "God did not make them out of existing things (*ouk ex ontōn epoiēsen auta*)." Although this latter phrase has often been cited as an early and explicit assertion of creation out of nothing, actually such an idea is quite remote,[42] since "the non-existent [in 2 Maccabees 7:28] is not absolute nothing, but . . . the metaphysical substance . . . in an uncrystallized state."[43] This relative "nonbeing" referred to a chaotic, shadowy state of matter before the world was made; as we might say in biblical terms, "without form and void." Such a view is implicit throughout the Greco-Roman literature of the time of Christianity's inception, and there is no indication in the Christian writings that they held a different view. On the contrary, a famous late nineteenth-century study by Edwin Hatch of the inroads of Greek philosophy into early Christianity describes the tacit but widespread assumption of the coexistence of matter with God.

> There was a universal belief that beneath the qualities of all existing things lay a substratum or substance on which they were grafted. . . . It was sometimes conceived of as a vast shapeless but plastic mass, to which the Creator gave form, partly by molding it as a potter molds clay, partly by combining various elements as a builder combined his materials in the construction of a house.[44]

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[41]Langdon Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth: A Study of the Christian Doctrine of Creation* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1959), p. 49.

[42]Foerster, in *Theological Dictionary,* 3:1016. Hugh Nibley points out that this phrase refers to a change from another "phase of a going concern." See his "Treasures in the Heavens," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8 (Autumn/Winter 1974):88, note 23. Cf. Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 46ff., for development of this idea.

[43]C. A. Scharbau, as quoted by Foerster, in *Theological Dictionary,* 3:1001, n. 6.

[44]Edwin Hatch, *The Influence of Greek Ideas on Christianity* (London and Edinburgh: Williams and Norgate, 1892), pp. 194ff.

In spite of the fact that this assumption is not regularly made explicit, the two types of expression, the one specifying the pre-existing material and the other emphasizing the new state of being or order achieved in creation, continued to develop along parallel lines.[45]

But if some Jewish writers were beginning to show the influence of Greek ideas and culture, Jesus and his followers taught the God of the Fathers, not a new or higher immaterial God. Jesus' summons for men to live as God would have them was entirely in the prophetic tradition of what Tillich calls "biblical personalism." In radical contrast to "philosophical ontology," he insists, "no ontological search can be found in the biblical literature."[46] The authors of scripture were simply not concerned with defining the nature of being. As McGiffert explains it in a somewhat regretful tone, "Jesus' idea of God indeed is quite naive and anthropomorphic, and there is no sign that he was troubled by any speculative problems or difficulties."[47]

During his mortal ministry, Jesus spoke simply of "the creation which God created" (Mark 13:19), without elaborating on the details, and this was in harmony with the Rabbinic view which regarded speculations on the nature of preexistent matter as "useless and

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[45]Cf., for example, 1QS (the *Manual of Discipline* from the Dead Sea Scrolls), 3.15-18, and the *Shepherd of Hermas,* Vision 1.1.6, in *Apostolic Fathers,* trans. Kirsopp Lake, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965), 2:8: "*Ho theos en tois ouranois katoikōn kai ktisas ek tou mē ontos ta onta* (God who dwells in Heaven and created that which is out of that which is not. . . .)" with Justin Martyr, *First Apology* x (*ANF,* 1:165): "We have been taught that He in the beginning did of his goodness, for man's sake, create all things out of unformed matter (*ex amorphou hylēs*). Cf. *First Apology,* 49 (*ANF,* 1:182). Likewise in the *Secrets of Enoch,* 25.1-3, God says, "I commanded . . . that visible things should come down from invisible. . . ." (As cited in Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks,* p. 111.) Cf. the similar phraseology in Philo, that early first-century A.D. Jewish philosopher in Alexandria: "This cosmos of ours was formed out of all that there is of water, and air and fire, not even the smallest particle being left outside" (*De Plantatione* 2.6). Further, "when the substance of the universe was without shape and figure God gave it these; when it had no definite character God molded it into definiteness . . ." (*De Somniis* 2.6.45). Although *De Somniis* 1.8.76 states that God "*ha proteron ouk ēn epoiesen, ou dēmiourgos monon al kai ktistēs autos ōn* (the things which before were not he made, not only being the craftsman but also himself the creator)," this is thought to be a later interpolation. See Edwin Hatch, *Influence of Greek Ideas,* p. 183. Cf. Philo's *De Opificio Mundi* v. 21. 26. Texts of Philo's works with excellent English translations are available in ten volumes of the *Loeb Classical Library,* ed. and trans. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1929-1962). For a contrasting view of Philo's conception of creation see Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo,* 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1947), 1:180, 300ff.

[46]Tillich, *Systematic Theology,* 2:11ff.

[47]Arthur C. McGiffert, *The God of the Early Christians* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1924), p. 4.

dangerous," since "it is enough to say that God created the world and all that therein is."[48]

On the other hand, for the most part the New Testament was composed in Greek, and its terminology was greatly influenced by the Septuagint. Thus the term *demiourgos* is used only once, in Hebrews 11:10, which has no direct reference to the creation. The most common verb to describe the creative activity is *ktidzō* but it is followed in frequency by *poieō* (to make or produce, especially of art), and *plassō* (to form, mold, shape or fashion), both of which are used synonymously. Despite the attempt of later commentators to exploit such passages as Romans 4:17, 11:36, Colossians 1:16, and Hebrews 11:3 to show an implicit creation *ex nihilo,* a closer examination of the texts belies this interpretation. As Werner Foerster admits, Romans 4:17, when translated "calls into existence the things that do not exist" (RSV, from *kalountos ta mē onta hōs onta*), "contains a logical impossibility. . . . One can call forth only that which already exists."[49] The Authorized Version remains closer to the original.

Furthermore, in Romans 9:20-23 Paul himself employs the potter-vessel image of Isaiah 29:16, while 2 Peter 3:5 reminds us that the earth "was formed out of water" (RSV)—the primeval chaos, or "deep" of Genesis 1:2. The plain fact is that the New Testament writers were at one with those of the Old when they referred to the creation; this and the period immediately following is characterized by Kelly as a "pre-reflective, pre-theological phase of Christian belief."[50] What this means for the present discussion is that no one had yet thought of a creation "out of nothing."

THE CONFLICT WITH GNOSTICISM

Two major currents of thought were instrumental in bringing about the reinterpretation of the mode of creation among Christians: the Gnostic cosmologies which denigrated the material creation *and* its creator or Demiurge, and the Greek philosophical conceptions of God as the One, transcendently good, immaterial, and eternally unchanging.

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[48]Foerster, in *Theological Dictionary,* 3:1017. Cf. George Foote Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era,* 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1927), 1:381.

[49]Foerster, in *Theological Dictionary,* 3:1010. "The idea of a command presupposes the existence of ministering and obedient powers to carry out the will to create." Ibid. n. 72. See above, note 42, and below, note 84.

[50]Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines,* p. 90.

By the latter part of the first century A.D., especially during the persecutions of Domitian's reign (81-96), the forces of the world seemed about to overwhelm the young church, now virtually bereft of the personal guidance of the apostles. Many Christians were bewildered by the seeming disintegration of their world. Numerous "false prophets" came forth claiming to be the guardians of the knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom.

> It was under such circumstances that the Gnostic cosmologists produced their dualistic cosmogonies to exonerate the supreme Creator from complicity in the malign state of affairs by attributing it to the Demiurge.[51]

The basic idea is that the Demiurge who created the world is far down the hierarchical scale of being from the supreme Unknown Father and, either out of ignorance or rebellion, made the universe full of evil and defect, which became a prison into which the souls or pure elements of spirit were cast down.[52] Such thinking was a real threat to the Old Testament account of creation, and against this mythology Christian and Jewish writers alike were pushed to clarify the Genesis account in terms of the Creator as the absolute soul existent being.

A good example of the sort of challenge that stimulated the recasting of the Old Testament view of creation is Marcion, who left the Christian Church in Rome in A.D. 144, insisting on the literal meaning of the Jewish scriptures. For Marcion the strict legalistic God of the Old Testament could not be reconciled with the grace and redeeming love revealed in the gospel of Christ, and he concluded that there must be two Gods, the lower Demiurge whom the Jews worshipped, and the supreme "hidden" God revealed for the first time by Jesus.[53] Although Marcion was not a Gnostic in the strict sense, his low opinion of the Creator closely parallels Gnostic cosmological schemes. Together with the Gnostic attack on the harsh and seemingly capricious Creator in the Old Testament, Marcion's rejection of the Jewish scriptures and Deity, on the basis of his interpretation of Paul, brought a response from orthodox circles which sought to allegorize the Old Testament and describe its God in the more acceptable philosophical language of divine transcendence. "Christians in the second century had rejected

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[51]E. O. James, *Creation and Cosmology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1969), p. 93.

[52]See Werner Foerster, *Patristic Evidence,* vol. 1, *Gnosis: A Selection of Gnostic Texts,* trans. R. McLean Wilson (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 4ff.

[53]See Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 1.2 *et passim* in *ANF,* 3:271ff.

the gnostic attack on creator and creation, and had in rebuttal asserted both the goodness of the Creator and Creation."[54]

Ironically, the reaction against the Marcionite and Gnostic views put the orthodox Christian God up to compete for superlatives with the Supreme Hidden God of Gnosticism, until finally the biblical Father was pushed into a transcendent alienness beyond comprehensible reality. Obviously this super-Being could be no mere craftsman or artificer, and an explicit formulation of a creation *ex nihilo* concept was the next logical step. The step was taken by Irenaeus, the Bishop of Lyon near the end of the second century, in his anti-Gnostic treatise *Against Heresies.*[55] In the face of the Gnostic dualism which attempted to isolate the supreme God from the visible universe, Irenaeus countered by asserting the creation of the world out of "nothing," i.e., God's will alone. This means that the world takes its being directly from God and is therefore good, rather than intrinsically evil and alien from divine being, as the Gnostics taught. "They do not believe," Irenaeus argued, "that God, according to His pleasure, in the exercise of His own will and power, formed all things . . . out of what did not exist."[56] Although this is impossible for men, all things are possible with God:

> While men, indeed, cannot make anything out of nothing, but only out of matter already existing, yet God is in this point pre-eminently superior to men, that He Himself called into being the substance of His creation, when it previously had no existence.[57]

But this was a new argument, formulated for polemical purposes, and did not win immediate assent from Irenaeus' peers.[58] There was a certain amount of rethinking necessary concerning basic ideas about the nature of deity.[59]

THE GOD OF PHILOSOPHY

A new conception of God in terms of the absolutes of Greek philosophy is implicit in the following analysis by E. O. James, and this development went hand in hand with the reaction to Gnosticism in making the belief in an *ex nihilo* creation an inevitable adjunct:

> By the end of the second century, largely as a result of the conflict with Gnosticism, the view of the cosmos being fashioned from

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[54]Brooks Otis, "Cappadocian Thought as a Coherent System," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 12 (1958):114.
[55]In *ANF,* 1:315-567.
[56]Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 2.10.2, in *ANF,* 1:370.
[57]Ibid., 2.10.4.
[58]Hatch, *Influence of Greek Ideas,* p. 198.
[59]See Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth,* pp. 47ff.

> pre-existent matter was abandoned in favor of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. God alone, it was affirmed, was without beginning or end as the Ultimate Principle, existing in his own right as Creator. Therefore, the cosmos was created by him "out of nothing."[60]

In the struggle against the gross heresies of the Gnostics, "orthodox" Christianity rushed to the citadel of Greek philosophy. Second-century pagan philosophers spoke scornfully of Christians as people who believed in a God who had a human form,[61] and sophisticated Christians, including converted philosophers such as Justin Martyr, were embarrassed by the naïveté of their theology. They could not help but be influenced by what G. L. Prestige calls the "speculative influence" which "permeated the very atmosphere mentally absorbed by the Christians of the second and third centuries, even more completely than simplified biology and third-hand physics pervade the popular intellectual atmosphere of the twentieth century."[62] The simplicity of Christian doctrine, which Paul wrote makes "foolish the wisdom of this world" (1 Corinthians 1:20), was now seen by many Christians as well as by the pagans to be rather strange and outdated.

When Justin, the Platonist Christian convert who was martyred in A.D. 165, taught a preexistent primal matter (*hylē*) which, he assures us, "we have learned" from our revelations,[63] he was well within the tradition of Clement, the earlier (c. A.D. 96) bishop of Rome. Clement had praised God who "has made manifest (*ephaneropoiēsas*) the everlasting fabric (*aenaon sustasin*) of the world."[64] But when Justine associates this with Plato's teaching in the *Timaeus*,[65] he calls to mind the Greek mythological tales of a bungling demiurge who formed the world out of primordial matter (*hylē*) which resisted perfection, and thus a defective world was created.[66]

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[60]James, *Creation and Cosmology,* p. 92.

[61]See note 36 above.

[62]Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought,* p. xvii.

[63]Justin, *First Apology* 59, in *ANF,* 1:182. Cf. *First Apology* 10, in *ANF,* 1:165. The whole universe, he insists, is made out of this substratum.

[64]1 Clement 60.1, in *Apostolic Fathers,* 1:112. Cf. also *Clementine Recognitions* 1.27 and 8.16, in *ANF,* 8:85 and 169ff. The latter passage mixes the earlier tradition with the later *ex nihilo* doctrine, but the incongruity is glaring.

[65]Justin, *First Apology* 59, in *ANF,* 1:182. Justin believed that Plato borrowed this concept from Moses.

[66]E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1965), pp. 13ff. For the relationship of this idea to Plato, see A. H. Armstrong, *An Introduction to Ancient Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 13ff. On the Manichaean personification of Darkness as *hylē* see Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), pp. 210ff.

Justin's peers, including the Apologists Aristides of Athens, Justin's renegade pupil Tatian, Athenagoras of Athens, Theophilus of Antioch, and later Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and his successor Origen, were only too eager to shun the superstitions of mythology and exploit any links between their own ideas of God and those found in Platonism, the most widespread and respected of all philosophic traditions. "It was the Platonic tradition which was to play the vital role in determining the image of God which predominates in the thought of the [Church] Fathers."[67] The now well-worn description of God as "without body, parts or passions," taken from the first of the Church of England's Thirty-nine Articles, "is not the sort of description of God which arises naturally or spontaneously from the Bible taken by itself," Maurice Wiles reminds us. "It comes straight from this Platonic tradition which the Fathers shared with the most thoughtful of their pagan contemporaries."[68] The Platonic dualism between spirit (or intellect) and matter, between the real and the illusory, the eternal and the transitory, the One and the many, gained increasing support among the Church Fathers. Where the Bible speaks of God as unchanging, referring to his constancy in judgment and grace, the Fathers affirmed from this a metaphysical static permanence; it seemed obvious that a perfect being does not change.[69] The concept of unity has long fascinated both the philosophical and the religious mind. From the biblical emphasis on Jehovah as the only true God a leap had to be made to the mathematical ideal of a simple undifferentiated unity, and this concept became axiomatic from Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria through Origen,[70] finding its most fervent and eloquent expression in Augustine. The tendency was always to describe God in absolutes and infinites, and Athenagoras, as early as the latter part of the second century, professed a belief in "one God, the uncreated, eternal, invisible, impassible, incomprehensible, uncontainable, comprehended only by mind and reason, clothed in light and beauty and spirit and power indescribable, by whom the totality came to be."[71] Such a being could not have any peer, since there can only be one infinite, and infinitude was equated with divine or eternal, so that only God himself could be eternal in any ultimate sense.[72]

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[67]Maurice Wiles, *The Christian Fathers* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1966), p. 16.

[68]Ibid., p. 17.

[69]Ibid., p. 21.

[70]Ibid., p. 18.

[71]Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians* 10, in *ANF*, 2:133.

[72]Athenagoras himself did not draw the conclusion of a creation *ex nihilo* from this. See p. 308 below.

This wholesale adoption of Greek philosophical metaphysics, which is still the basis of Christian theology, gave rise to serious questions—indeed numerous heresies—concerning several basic Christian doctrines, since Christians worshipped Jesus as God. How can an unchanging, impassible God become incarnate, or suffer and die? How can the Platonic concept of God as a simple undifferentiated unity be thought to have a Son who is also divine?[73] How can a God without any passions possess "love"? And can a totally self-sufficient, never-changing God participate in any act of creation as though in need of anything outside himself?

The only way these difficulties could be resolved was to push the philosophic logic even further, and this is where Christianity went beyond Greek philosophy. Justin himself repudiated the Stoic idea that the world is necessary to God's own existence or divinity, since he was God before the world was made.[74] Tatian, who left the Roman Church after the martyrdom of his teacher Justin, agreed with him that the world was created out of matter, but further postulated an absolute creation, apparently from nothing, of that matter by God. "For matter is not, like God, without beginning," he reasoned.[75] About the same time Theophilus, who became bishop at Antioch in A.D. 168, argued against the Platonists that, if God is uncreate and matter is uncreate [=eternal], then God cannot be the Maker of the universe, nor is there any indication of the monarchy, or single rulership, of God. The power of God is shown by his creation of the world "out of things that are not," according to Theophilus; any craftsman (*demiourgos*) can manipulate existent material.[76] In spite of such logic, as late as the beginning of the third century the Christian Hermogones shared with the Greek mind the view that creation *ex nihilo* is wholly irrational.[77] But his con-

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[73]Wiles calls this a "logical impossibility." *Christian Fathers,* p. 19.

[74]Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 127, in *ANF,* 1:263.

[75]Tatian, *Address to the Greeks* 5; cf. 12, in *ANF,* 2:67 and 70. This was an early Apologetic attack on pagan philosophy, and the only one of his several works to be preserved. Subsequently Tatian apparently founded or at least led an extreme ascetic sect which opposed marriage and denied the salvation of Adam. Consequently his innovative views on creation had little influence on his immediate contemporaries, and may explain the reluctance of Athenagoras and Clement to endorse the belief in creation *ex nihilo.* (Irenaeus' development of this doctrine was on an entirely different basis, that of a refutation of heretical Christians rather than a defense of the faith directed to outsiders.

[76]Theophilus of Antioch, *To Autolychus* 2.4, in *ANF,* 2:95. The passage is problematical, since it is debatable whether Theophilus conceived of an absolute creation *ex nihilo* in the modern sense. His terminology still points to a shadowy substratum of preexistent chaos, "without form and void." See note 42 above.

[77]McGiffert, *The God of the Early Christians,* p. 157. On Hermogones, see Tertullian, *Against Hermogones* 2, in *ANF,* 3:477ff.

temporary Tertullian, despite his claim to be a firm opponent of Greek philosophy, reasoned with rigid philosophical logic when he objected that only the divine is eternal, which also implies unchangeableness and indivisibility. Eternal matter would subject God to limitations and destroy his liberty. Tertullian concluded, "It is more worthy to believe that God is the free author of evil things than to believe that he is a slave," that is, limited in any respect by coexistent matter.[78]

In fact, the rash of arguments in favor of *ex nihilo* creation at the end of the second century points to the newness of the concept.[79] Tertullian's tract especially adds to the evidence that the argument was against an established belief within the Church, since it was directed against a fellow Christian rather than against Platonism. Tertullian himself concedes that creation out of nothing is not explicitly stated in the scriptures, but asserts that since it is not denied either, the silence on the matter implies that God does have the power to create *ex nihilo,* since that is more logical.[80] Such "logic" had escaped Athenagoras, who despite his stress on the transcendence of God,[81] in the same context explains concerning the preexistent Son:

> He came forth to be the energizing power of all things, which lay like a nature without attributes, and an inactive earth, the grosser particles being mixed up with the lighter.[82]

This chaotic matter also existed before the creation. Although Athenagoras repeatedly emphasizes the disparity between matter and God, the created and the Uncreate, he did not subscribe to Tatian's view of the precreation of primal matter:

> But if they are at the greatest possible remove from one another—as far asunder as is the potter and the clay (matter being the clay, and the artist the potter)—so is God, the Framer of the world, and matter, which is subservient to Him for the purpose of His art. But as the clay cannot become vessels of itself without art, so neither did matter, which is capable of taking all forms, receive, apart from God the Framer, distinction and shape and order. . . .[83]

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[78]Tertullian, *Against Hermogones* 21, in *ANF,* 3:489.

[79]Origen, *On First Principles* 2.1.4, in *ANF,* 4:269, expressed his surprise that "So many distinguished men" have believed in uncreated matter.

[80]Tertullian, *Against Hermogones* 21, in *ANF,* 3:489.

[81]See note 71 above.

[82]Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians* 10, in *ANF,* 2:133. Cf. chapters 24 and 19 (pp. 141 and 138), where he explicitly states that God as an artificer (*demiourgos*) requires matter, but this relationship proves the priority and superiority of God.

[83]Athenagoras, *A Plea for Christians* 10, in *ANF,* 2:133.

If Athenagoras was aware of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo,* he gives no indication of it: the widest disparity he can think of as a comparison is that between the Artificer and his materials.

Clement of Alexandria, the head of the Christian philosophical school there around A.D. 200, is more problematical, since he uses apparent creation *ex nihilo* language, but without the later doctrinal connotations associated with such terminology. Chadwick argues that although the declaration that the world is made "out of nothing" occurs three times in the *Stromata* (a collection of his miscellaneous notes), his usage is similar to that of Philo, referring to the ordering of formless matter.

> In each case the phrase he employs is *ek mē ontos,* not *ex ouk ontos;* that is to say, it is made not from that which is absolutely non-existent, but from relative non-being or unformed matter, so shadowy and vague that it cannot be said to have the status of "being," which is imparted to it by the shaping hand of the Creator.[84]

Nevertheless, the idea of a creation *ex nihilo* was being discussed in Christian intellectual circles by this time. Clement himself seems aware of the difference between an absolute creation out of nothing and creation out of primal matter in at least one passage,[85] where he does not view it as crucial to orthodoxy. But in his "Hymn to the Paedogogus" he clearly favors the view of creation from pre-existent material:

> O King. . . .
> Maker of all, who heaven and heaven's adornment
> By the Divine Word alone didst make;
> . . . according to a well-ordered plan;
> Out of a confused heap who didst create
> This ordered sphere, and from the shapeless mass
> Of matter didst the universe adorn. . . .[86]

Clement was apparently too cautious to advocate the unscriptural idea of creation *ex nihilo* to his pupils, however congenial it may have been to his Christian philosophical system.

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[84]Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought,* pp. 46ff. Cf. the use of the negative particle *me* in Romans 4:17 and 1 Corinthians 1:28. This view of Clement, however, is controversial. James, *Creation and Cosmology,* p. 92, interprets Clement similarly, but this is in contradiction to E. F. Osborne, *The Philosophy of Clement of Alexandria* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1957), p. 33, who wrongly concluded, "Clement is the first person to state and give reasons for the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo.*" If Clement did favor the *ex nihilo* viewpoint, he was preceded by Tatian, Theophilus, and Irenaeus in formulating an explicit position on the subject.

[85]Clement, *Stromata* 2.16, in *ANF,* 2:364.

[86]Clement, *The Instructor* 3.12, in *ANF,* 2:296.

The dynamic of doctrinal transition appears also in Origen, whose stature as a theologian in the Eastern Church is often compared to that of Augustine in the West. In his early speculative treatise *On First Principles,* Origen retained a belief in the preexistence of both matter and souls, but denied that these always existed of themselves; in fact he implied that creation *ex nihilo* was taught by the apostles and had been handed down as Church doctrine.[87] "Nevertheless," Chadwick notes, "Origen never reaches a perfectly clear opinion on the exact status of matter in the divine purpose. . . ."[88] In his later Apologetic work *Against Celsus* he relegated the question of uncreated matter to the sphere of physics rather than theology;[89] in other words, creation *ex nihilo* was not yet established as an article of the faith, although by Origen's time "it had become the prevailing theory in the Christian Church. God had created matter. He was not merely the Architect of the universe, but its Source."[90]

THE TRINITARIAN CONTROVERSY

In the third and fourth centuries the emerging Catholic Church, which experienced the reversal from official repression to adoption and support by the state, was docrinally preoccupied with defining and refining its position on the internal relationship of the Godhead. What was the relationship of God the Son to God the Father? Specifically, how can the belief in the divinity of Jesus as the Son of God be reconciled with the commitment to a mono-

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[87]Origen, *On First Principles,* preface 4, in *ANF,* 4:240. Cf. 2.1.4 and 2.3.3 (pp. 296 and 272).

[88]Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought,* p. 86. Origen referred to the common substratum of matter without form or properties upon which qualities may be stamped from archetypal ideas. See *Against Celsus* 3.41; 4.57; 6.77; and *First Principles* 4.1.35; in *ANF,* 4:480, 523ff., 608, and 380. His interpretation of the creation as an eternal activity of God implied that created matter in some form always existed, even if its existence was contingent rather than necessary being. See Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Faith, Trinity, Incarnation,* vol. 1, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), p. 203.

[89]Origen, *Against Celsus* 4:60, in *ANF,* 4:525. Perhaps his reticence here was due to his recognition (ibid., 5.23,24 [p. 553]) that the affirmation, "all things are possible with God," does not refer to things "non-existent" or inconceivable. God cannot do anything contrary to reason, and to the Greek philosophical mind creation out of nothing was unreasonable (see note 77 above).

[90]Hatch, *Influence of Greek Ideas,* p. 197. It is illuminating to note that as late as the middle of the fourth century, creation *ex nihilo* was still not firmly established as church doctrine. Athanasius, despite his usual assumption of it throughout the anti-Arian writings (an assumption shared by his opponents), concedes that it is not crucial to orthodoxy. See his *Orations Against the Arians* 2.16.22, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers,* Second Series, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans, 1952), 4:359. Cited hereafter as *NPNF-2.*)

theistic faith in "the only true God" inherited from Judaism and demanded by Greek absolutism? It will be seen that the creation *ex nihilo* doctrine had much to do with the final formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, developed principally by Augustine, which is still the touchstone of orthodox Christianity.

As with the doctrine of creation, the subtle theological distinctions concerning the nature of the Godhead which culminated in ecumenical councils of Nicaea and Constantinople in the fourth century were not an issue in earlier discussions on the subject, at least not before the beginning of the third century. Jesus was spoken of as distinct from his Father, but nevertheless divine.[91] As Prestige tells us, "The recognition of divine monarchy [monotheism] and the proclamation of a divine triad were originally presented as independent facts."[92] The Christian apologists were faced on the one hand with the accusation of polytheism from Judaism,[93] and on the other by the Hellenistic interpretation of mythological gods as personified attributes or manifestations of the Supreme Unity governing the universe.[94] Thus when Justin insists that the Logos (the "Word" of John 1:1-14) is numerically distinct (*arithmō heteron*) from the Father,[95] he is defending the Christian belief which denied strict monotheism. Likewise the use of the term *triad* by Theophilus of Antioch[96] and that of *trinitas* by Tertullian[97] were affirmations of the distinction of persons, not the tri-unity which "trinity" later came to connote.[98]

Nevertheless, the philosophical pressures on Christian intellectuals did not abate, and the history of Christian doctrine in the third and fourth centuries is littered with the names of "heretics" such as Sabellius, Praxeus, Noetus, and Marcellus who attempted to make the distinctions in the Godhead only nominal. This "Modalism," or belief that the persons of the divine triad are mere modes of one being, was known to contemporaries as monarchianism and later as Sabellianism, after Sabellius, one of its early third-century exponents in Rome. Against this, Tertullian expounded

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[91]E.g., 2 Clement 1.1, in *Apostolic Fathers,* 1:128; Ignatius, *Epistle to the Ephesians* 18.2 and 7.2 in ibid., 1:190 and 180; *Epistle of Barnabas* 5.5; 6.12 and 7.2; in ibid., 1:354, 360, and 364.

[92]Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought,* p. 97.

[93]Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Church Fathers,* p. 362, notes that the "starting point of all the discussion of the problem of tri-unity was the rejection of the conception of the absolute unity of God as defined on behalf of Judaism by Philo."

[94]Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines,* pp. 7ff.

[95]Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 138 and 56, in *ANF,* 1:264 and 223ff.

[96]Theophilus, *To Autolychus* 15, in *ANF,* 2:101.

[97]Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 3, in *ANF,* 3:599.

[98]Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought,* p. 93.

a "governmental monarchy" which stressed the unity of the Godhead's will and power, based upon an analysis of the term *monarchia* as "single rule":

> I am sure that monarchy has no other meaning than single and individual rule; but for all that this monarchy does not, because it is the government of one, preclude him whose government it is from having a son . . . or from ministering his own government by whatever agents he will.[99]

There is only one rule of the universe, but a hierarchy of rulers, a "trinity" of persons, numerically distinct and capable of being counted.[100]

Tertullian's designation of the Son as a "*personum, secundum a patre* [a personage, next to the Father]"[101] is echoed by Origen, who describes the Father and the Son as "two things in respect to persons, but one in unity of thought, in harmony, and in the identity of will."[102] Origen's teaching that the Son is a *deuteros theos,* or secondary God (since his deity is derived from the Father who alone is uncreated),[103] is known by the technical term "subordinationism," and was taken up by the Arians in the controversy which led to Nicaea. However, Origen also stressed the absolute likeness of the Son to the Father,[104] even using the term *homoousios* as a description of their kinship,[105] and he originated the idea that the three persons of the Godhead are distinct *hypostaseis* (substances or essences) from all eternity.[106] This concept of the "eternal generation" of the Son provided ammunition for the opponents of Arius as well, and it was this introduction of Greek metaphysical terminology which ironically led to the rejection of Origen's Neoplatonic theological framework.

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[99]Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 3, in *ANF,* 2:599. Cf. Tatian, *Address to the Greeks* 4, in *NAF,* 4:66; Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians* 14, in *ANF,* 2:135; and Novatian, *On the Trinity* 21, in *ANF,* 5:643ff.

[100]Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 2, in *ANF,* 3:598. Cf. Justin's terminology at note 95 above.

[101]Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 5 and 8, in *ANF,* 2:600ff and 602ff.

[102]Origen, *Against Celsus* 7.12, in *ANF* 4:643ff. Thus Origen can say, "We are not afraid to speak in one sense of two Gods, in another sense of one God" (*Dialogue with Heraclitus* 2, cited in Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines,* p. 129).

[103]Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John,* in J. P. Migne, ed., *Patrologiae Graeca,* 161 vols. (Paris: n.p., 1886), 14:108ff. Cf. *Against Celsus* 2.64, in *NAF,* 4:457; and *On First Principles* 1.3.3-5, in ibid., pp. 252ff.

[104]Origen, *First Principles* 1.2.12, in *ANF,* 4:251.

[105]Quoted by Johannes Quasten, *Patrology,* 2 vols. (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1960), 2:78. *Homoousios,* adopted as the technical term for the likeness of the Father and the Son at the Council of Nicaea, was here used by Origen in the sense of a common specific genus. See Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Church Fathers,* pp. 322ff.

[106]Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 2.10.75. As cited in Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines,* p. 129.

According to Platonism in this period, the order of reality emanates from "the One" (God) in a hierarchy, the second level being Mind or Logos, the agent of creation, and the World-Soul third. Origen found this system very convenient in explaining the order of the Godhead, since the functions of the Platonic Mind seemed analogous to that of the Son of God in Christianity, as did the World-Soul to the Holy Spirit. Origen's teaching that the Son was "eternally generated" from the Father is also strikingly similar to the emanation of the Divine Mind in Neoplatonism. However, such a system of emanations, having no definite differentiation between creator and creation, could not be reconciled with the increasingly accepted Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo,*[107] and was rejected by both sides in the Arian controversy. Arius was the monotheist *par excellence,* believing in "One God, alone unbegotten, alone everlasting, . . . alone sovereign," and thus could not accept the full divinity of Christ.[108] Although the greatest and most perfect of all "creatures," Christ was nonetheless "alien from and utterly dissimilar to the Father's essence and being."[109] Arius had no quarrel with the firm line between the divine reality inherent in an uncreated being (God) and that of creatures: his insistence was that Christ, the "Son," belonged to the latter category. In fact the controversy further widened this theoretical gulf:

> What emerged in the fourth century was a perception that no doctrine of mediating the spiritual and material (or uncreated and created) poles of the Platonic dualism could suffice if God were really infinite and incomprehensible and Christ were really God.[110]

Obviously this raised another problem as to how such a transcendent Saviour could be the "mediator" of mankind, but this so-called Christological controversy belongs to another level of the dispute, carried on well into the next century.

At Nicaea in 325 the general council almost unanimously agreed to condemn the position of Arius, but many of the conservative majority chafed at the prescription in the creed that

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[107]Methodius, the platonist Bishop of Lycia, argued that there must be either a single uncreated which is ultimate and unique, or an infinite regress of uncreateds (*ageneta*). See his *On Free Will* 5 and 6, in *ANF*, 6:358ff.

[108]Letter of Arius to Alexander, Bishop of Alexandria, as cited in James Stevenson, ed., *A New Eusebius* (London: Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, 1970), p. 346.

[109]At least this is the way Athanasius characterizes his opponent's belief, in *Oration Against the Arians* 1.2.6, in *NPNF-2,* 4:309.

[110]Otis, "Cappadocian Thought," p. 114. Cf. Athanasius, *Oration Against the Arians* 1.13.58; 3.23.4; in *NPNF-2,* 4:340, 395.

the Son of God was "consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father," since it was completely foreign to scriptural terminology.[111] However, the formulation had the Emperor Constantine's strong backing, and the participants had little choice but to acquiesce. After all, the issue at Nicaea was not the unity of the Godhead in the Augustinian sense but the status of the divinity of the Son. As Eusebius explains, "the phrase 'of the substance' was indicative of the Son's being indeed from the Father, yet without being as if a part of Him." The Son was "not a part of His substance."[112] Any other interpretation would have brought the charge of Sabellianism upon the Council, and "there is simply not a trace of Conservative panic over any supposed Sabellian association or tendency of the term *homoousios*," since it was not "a definition of the unity of God, but of the full and absolute deity of Christ."[113] Even Athanasius, the leader of the anti-Arian party, maintained the real distinction of the Son from the Father, albeit insisting that they shared the same nature.[114]

Although the divinity of the Son was now settled in orthodox circles, the official use of the word *homoousios* led to further controversy, and a group of "semi-Arians" (basically the heirs of the Nicene conservatives) began advocating a modification of *homoousios* to *homoiousios*, to clarify that the Son was merely of "like substance" with the Father. During this heated and prolonged discussion Athanasius seems to have hardened his stance to assert that not merely exact resemblance but *identity* of substance (*ousia*) was intended. Thus the real doctrinal innovation of the fourth century was not the creed promulgated at the Council of Nicaea but Athanasius' later use of the word *homoousios* to express identity in substance. This was "a new development in the Greek language."[115]

THE CONTRIBUTION OF AUGUSTINE

While the leading theologians in the Eastern Church developed an explanation of the Godhead which emphasized the separate

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[111]See Eusebius of Caesarea's apologetic letter to his church over the outcome, in Stevenson, *A New Eusebius,* pp. 364ff. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought,* p. 153, tells us that "philosophical analysis was needed to define precisely how the Scripture ought to be understood."

[112]Stevenson, *A New Eusebius,* p. 366.

[113]Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought,* p. 24.

[114]Athanasius, *Oration Against the Arians* 1.13.58; 3.23.4; in *NPNF-2,* 4:340, 395.

[115]Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought,* p. 219. He notes further (p. 268) that "the semi-Arians were substantially correct in their view that homoousios, as employed in the creed of Nicaea, really meant what they preferred to express by the word homoeousios [sic]."

identity of the persons of the Trinity, and which became the basis of the decrees of the Council of Constantinople in 381, the definitive formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity in the West had to wait for Augustine, whose masterful *De Trinitate* was completed around 419. It is in Augustine that we find the relationship of the tri-une God and the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* fully developed. Although, like Origen, he was vastly influenced in his conception of God by the Neoplatonism of Plotinus,[116] "Augustine draws his line firmly and finally between the one Maker and the many things made."[117] Augustine's insistence upon and exposition of the *ex nihilo* theory reflects his earlier struggle over the problem of evil:

> Just as the Alexandrian Christians developed the idea of the sole beneficent Creator in an absolute sense as a response to the Gnostic cosmological dualistic speculations, so Augustine developed the specific doctrine of *ex nihilo* creation in reaction to the Manichaean dualism, i.e., [according to Augustine] the world is not inherently evil because it comes from God's being.[118]

Augustine's solution to the problem of evil was to deny it any essential reality: God is totally good and created everything himself out of nothing, so it must follow that there is really no evil in creation.[119]

As has been noted, by Augustine's time it was well established in both East and West that being or existence in the full sense belongs to God alone.[120] "For all substance that is not a created thing is God, and all that is not created is God."[121] Because of his conception of God in terms of a single divine substance—unchangeable, incorruptible, eternal, immortal, and infinite[122]—he excludes

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[116]James, *Creation and Cosmology,* pp. 93ff.

[117]John Burnaby, *Amor Dei,* p. 163, as cited by Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 296. See Augustine's *Confessions* 7.9-11, 20-21; 12.7; trans. R. S. Pine-Coffin (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961), pp. 141ff., 154ff., and 284ff.

[118]James, *Creation and Cosmology,* pp. 93ff. The Manichaean system depicted Good and Evil as two independent and equal powers on the cosmic level which were in a constant struggle over the souls of men.

[119]In true Platonic fashion, Augustine insists that what we perceive as evil is really only incomplete goodness; i.e., anything less than God is imperfect, changeable, and incomplete, and to that extent unreal or illusory. See his *Confessions* 7.12 and 13 (Penguin ed., pp. 148ff.). The irony of Augustine's position is that in attempting to avoid one dualism (Good/Evil), he sets up another (Creator/creation), which in effect becomes the same thing, since evil is defined as a lack of goodness or being, and this lack of true being is the prime characteristic of creation.

[120]Callahan, *Augustine and the Greek Philosophers,* p. 18; cf. Hatch, note 90 above.

[121]Augustine, *On the Trinity* 1.6.9, in *NPNF-1,* 3:21.

[122]Augustine, *City of God* 11.24, in *NPNF-1,* M2:218; *On the Trinity* 15.5.8, in *NPNF-1,* 3:303.

every hint of subordinationism and separate identity in the Godhead. "Let no separation be imagined to exist in this Trinity either in time or space, but that these three are equal and co-eternal, and absolutely of one nature."[123] He could not understand or accept the Greek distinction between one *ousia* and three *hypostaseis* propounded by the Cappadocians, and preferred instead the formula "one essence or substance and three persons,"[124] the basic meaning behind the Greek term *prosopon* (= Latin *persona*) being that of a mask or outward visage. Consequently, everything concerning God should be expressed in the singular.[125] Even the use of the term "three persons" bothered Augustine; he himself explains that he only employed it to avoid the charge of Sabellianism.[126] As Tillich points out, Augustine's distinction of persons is "without any content"; it is used "not in order to say something, but in order not to remain silent."[127]

Although Augustine makes an ingenious and involved analysis of the three persons of the Trinity using internal, psychological analogies, he did not expect anyone to apprehend this transcendent Deity. In fact, such a comprehension is not within the realm of possibility:

> We are speaking of God; is it any wonder if thou dost not understand? For if thou dost comprehend, He is not God. Let there be pious confession of ignorance, rather than a rash profession of knowledge. To reach God by the mind in any measure is great blessedness, but to comprehend Him is altogether impossible.[128]

After all, God is that unknowable, "wholly other" eternal reality with whom created beings have no essential kinship. "Whatever man may think, that which is made is not like Him who made it. . . . God is ineffable. . . . What is He then? I could only tell thee what He is not."[129] As the eminent Catholic scholar Etienne Gilson describes "the Christian world of St. Augustine":

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[123]Augustine, Letter 169, in *The Fathers of the Church*, 67 vols. (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1955), 12:54. Cf. *On the Trinity* 6.10.11, in *NPNF-1*, 3:102ff.

[124]Augustine, *On the Trinity* 5.7.10; 7.5.10; in *NPNF-1*, 3:92, 11.

[125]Ibid., 5.7.9 (pp. 91ff.). Whence the formula of the Athanasian Creed (see note 2 above), "yet there are not three eternals [incomprehensibles, almighties, etc.], but one eternal. . . ." Thus Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, p. 273, notes that the Athanasian Creed is "Augustinian through and through."

[126]Augustine, *On the Trinity* 7.4.7-9, in *NPNF-1*, 3:109ff.

[127]Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 2:944. Cf. Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, p. 358.

[128]Augustine, Sermon 117.3.5, in *PL*, 38:663.

[129]Augustine, *Discourses on the Psalms* 77.12, in *PL*, 35:1090.

> Between "Him who is" and ourselves, there is the infinite metaphysical chasm which separates the complete self-sufficiency of His own existence from the intrinsic lack of necessity of our own existence.[130]

CONCLUSION

The history of Christian thought can yield no equal to Augustine in resolving the dilemma of the doctrine of God, either in brilliance or influence. His emphasis on one God manifested in three persons rather than three persons in one Godhead has remained decisive for the Christian Church in the West to this day, and almost without exception its creeds reflect his paradoxical language:

> Those three, therefore, both seem to be mutually determined to each other, and are in themselves infinite. Now here, in corporeal things, one thing alone is not as much as three things together, and two are something more than one, but in that supreme Trinity one is as much as three together, nor are two anything more than one. And in themselves they are infinite. So both each are in each, and all in all, and each in all, all in all, and all are one.[131]

This orthodox Christian doctrine of the Trinity, as we have seen, may be understood to a great extent as a consequence and corollary of the unscriptural concept of a creation *ex nihilo*. This understanding of creation did not gain acceptance until after A.D. 200, but it colors almost all subsequent theological discussion, culminating in the definitive writings of Augustine two centuries later. When the Church found itself on the path of philosophy rather than that of revelation, it had to travel the whole road, and history has recorded no clearer documentation of the departure from the primitive faith held by the apostles than the acceptance of this magical God of philosophy who calls into existence all things out of nothing. It is not a doctrine which enhances the understanding of God, but must be accepted strictly on the authority of the Church, because it defies all natural experience and logic. In the words of one modern historian, "It is therefore absurd, meaningless, unverifiable and a waste of words to ask reason how that was brought into existence which previously had no existence."[132] In like manner the companion of *ex nihilo* theology, the doctrine of the Trinity, hardly fosters an intimate personal

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[130]Etienne Gilson, *God and Philosophy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1941), pp. 53ff.

[131]Augustine, *On the Trinity* 6.10.12, in *NPNF-1,* 3:103. Cf. notes 1, 2, 4, and 126 above.

[132]John H. Gay, "Four Medieval Views of Creation," *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (1963):271.

relationship with the loving Father in Heaven taught by Jesus. Adolph Harnack noted the disastrous results of this supposed triumph of Christian philosophy:

> The educated laity . . . regarded the orthodox formula rather as a necessary evil and as an unexplainable mystery than as an expression of their Faith. The victory of the Nicene Creed was a victory of the priests over the faith of the Christian people. . . . The people must simply believe the Faith; they accordingly did not live in this Faith, but in that Christianity of the second rank which is represented in the legends of the saints, in apocalypses, in image-worship, in the veneration of angels and martyrs, in crosses and amulets, in the Mass regarded as magical worship, and in sacramental worship of all sorts. Christ as the homoousios became a dogmatic form of words; and in place of this the bones of the martyrs became living saints, and the shades of the old dethroned gods, together with their worship, revived once more.[133]

Orthodox Christianity still labors under the burden of this excess philosophical baggage, and perhaps the consequences would be even more serious if Christians actually understood and believed the doctrines officially proclaimed by their churches. Studies have shown that most churchgoers today cling to the belief in a personal God to whom they can relate.[134] Even Freud could recognize the absurdity of the theologians' logic vis-à-vis meaningful religion, and his indictment of their folly is the irony of an atheist who acknowledges the superiority of the testimony of the Prophets over the philosophies of men:

> Philosophers . . . give the name of "God" to some vague abstraction which they have created for themselves; having done so they can pose before all the world as deists, as believers in God, and

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[133]Adolph Harnack, *History of Dogma,* trans. from the third German edition (1900) by Neil Buchanan, 7 vols. in 4 (New York: Dover Publications, 1961), 4:106.

[134]See, for example, Douglas W. Johnson and George W. Cornell, *Punctured Preconceptions: What North American Christians Think About the Church* (New York: Friendship Press, 1972), p. 44. In their poll of 2344 American church members, they posed the following statement: "I Believe in God as a heavenly Father, who watches over me and to whom I am personally accountable." Of those polled, 98.7% indicated agreement, and yet 96.4% said they subscribed to "honest and wholehearted belief" in the doctrines and teachings of their church. Technical questions about the nature of God were not included in the survey. However, it is revealing to note that while the established orthodox creedal churches have been consistently declining in membership in the past decades, the groups with a fundamentalist, biblical, personal-God orientation are booming. Perhaps the much-discussed estrangement of "modern man" (actually an intellectually elite minority—see 2 Nephi 9:28!) from God is closely related to a deeper understanding of the traditional creeds of Christianity. At any rate, Joseph Smith may be seen as a spokesman for the common man and common sense as well as a prophet if the success of his proselytizing followers is any indication. See D&C 123:12.

> they can even boast that they have recognized a higher, purer concept of God, notwithstanding that their God is now nothing more than an insubstantial shadow and no longer the mighty personality of religious doctrines.[135]

Joseph Smith taught that the first principle of revealed religion is to know for a certainty the character of God,[136] and his reaffirmation of Deity as the loving, personal Father of the scriptures stands in conspicuous contrast to the confusion and obscurity of traditional and modern theologies. Just as the orthodox doctrine of an incomprehensible God who creates *ex nihilo* is clearly at odds with the prophetic proclamation in both the Old and New Testaments, by the same measure the Latter-day Saint conception of divine creation in terms of the organization of eternal matter provides a remarkable commentary on Joseph Smith's claim to be a prophet of the Living God and on his work in the restitution of all things.

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[135]Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion,* trans. W. D. Robson-Scott (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor Books, 1964), pp. 57ff.

[136]*HC,* 6:305.