

Created out of nothing means created out of love

[C christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/created-out-nothing-means-created-out-love](https://christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/created-out-nothing-means-created-out-love)



Critical Essay

To say creation is *ex nihilo* is to say that divine love is the only power at work in the creation of everything.

by Norman Wirzba

November 1, 2021



(Photo © rebius / iStock / Getty)

Imagine being asked to give an account of the existence of your own life. You could say that you exist because your mother gave birth to you, and that she exists because she also had a mother. One can readily suppose the line of mothers to extend backward indefinitely.

But what about the conditions for the possibility of any kind of mothering/birthing process? Here you might speak about human communities and natural habitats that support human life. You might speak of a planet and biochemical processes that are so well suited to enable not just human life but all the life forms upon which people depend.

Norman Wirzba

[@NWirzba](#)

Norman Wirzba is professor of theology and ecology at Duke Divinity School and author of *This Sacred Life*.

[See All Articles](#)



Nov 17, 2021 issue

Now ask about the conditions for the possibility of planet Earth and its remarkable biospheres. You might respond by saying that Earth only exists as it does because it moves within a solar system that is itself within the Milky Way galaxy, one galaxy among countless others. It doesn't take long before you gesture toward the existence of an unfathomably immense universe—and come to the realization, as many people have, that you are an embodied, if distant, effect of stardust.

Some folks think it improper to ask about the conditions for the possibility of the universe. But for others this is the point where people might find themselves speaking of a divine being—a God who is fundamentally unlike the material reality in which we move. This divine being is not a “something” that makes the universe, nor does this God make the universe out of something, because what is at issue is the existence of anything at all. A “not something” creating a world out of nothing. This is a strange way of speaking. Do we need it?

When Christian theologians tried to make sense of this creation logic they said that God creates *ex nihilo*, or from nothing. This way of speaking is not attempting to give a mechanical or causal account of creation, as if there is some “nothing” that already “exists” and from which God then draws out life. Greek philosophers, thinking in mechanical, causal terms, were quite right to declare the impossibility of something coming from nothing.

If creation is not about providing a causal account of how the world began a long, long time ago, what is it attempting to do? The short answer: it is telling us that all places and all life are utterly gratuitous and gracious. This world and this life are sacred gifts that are meant to be cherished and celebrated. In a time when so many places, so many creatures, and so many human communities are being wasted, what could be more important than to recover the truth that this world and all its life are created by God?

A “not something” creates a world out of nothing. This is a strange way of speaking.

To say creation is *ex nihilo* is to say that divine love is the only reason and the only power at work in the creation of everything. But why should Christians—or anyone else—affirm this? It is because the God revealed to the Israelites and made flesh in Jesus was the champion and the lover of life. God's steadfast commitment to be with creatures and secure their shalom and salvation is the practical warrant for saying creation *ex nihilo* is also creation *ex amore*, as being "from love" and nothing else. *Ex nihilo*, in other words, enables people to say that life's gratuity is gracious rather than mendacious.

To say that creation is *ex nihilo* is to say that God was not constrained in any way in the creation of the world. God did not have to overcome recalcitrant matter or do battle with an evil principle. There was no force with which God needed to negotiate or contend. That creatures exist is only because God wants them to. God creates in complete freedom and as the expression of the divine, hospitable love that delights in the life of others.

Importantly, this means that God's creative power is not a coercive or dominating power that, like an earthly tyrant, achieves its results by forcefully (or violently) bringing unruly subjects under control. Instead, God's creative activity is the sort that creates the times and the places in which creatures can take root, be nurtured, and grow. The moment anything comes into being, it is the material manifestation of a divine intention that expresses how good it is for it to be. Each creature, we can say, is God's love variously made visible, tactile, auditory, fragrant, and nutritious.

If divine love alone is the power at work in every created thing, then we can also say that God and creatures do not exist in a competitive relationship with each other, as if the honoring of God requires the diminishment of a creature's life. Not at all. God is glorified in the specific liveliness of each creature. What God most wants for each creature is for it to achieve the specific potential that God's love has in store for it.

Creatures are not simply the *objects* of God's love. They are, more importantly and more mysteriously, the embodied sites through which the love of God is continuously at work in the world. God doesn't simply delight in creatures. More radically, each creature is the material expression of God's delighting life. This means that if people want to understand creatures in the best way possible, they should learn to delight in others and thereby sense something of the love of God at work in them.

This is not a uniquely Christian idea. People from around the world have long been drawn to the idea of a divine creator, because in their engagement with places and fellow creatures they often encounter a depth of significance and a plenitude of being that communicates the graciousness of the world. To be sure, there is ample acknowledgment of creaturely pain and suffering, but beneath the terror and the tragedy there is a mysterious and incomprehensible power that is believed to be more primordial and that is generative of life's ever-fresh natality.

It isn't simply that people can be amazed by life's intricacies, flavors, and beauties; it is the realization that raspberries, meadowlarks, and newborns exist, although they hardly need to, and that their existence is fundamentally good. Although scientists have done excellent work helping us understand how these creatures come to be what they are, that *they are at all* remains as a source of constant astonishment and, if one is appropriately humble and grateful, also an inspiration to be hospitable to and generous with others.

Very little is precious. Most everything can be turned into a source of profit.

The histories of so-called Christian nations and their leaders provide ample evidence that creation *ex nihilo* has not often enough been understood to be creation *ex amore*. Instead, the logic of creaturely life has been perverted and deployed to legitimate imperial and colonial projects that stifle and degrade places and creatures alike. Thinking (falsely) that God's power is coercive and controlling, Christian leaders have twisted the doctrine of creation into a "doctrine of discovery" that appropriated and privatized lands, decimated indigenous populations, and put in place the processes that commodified the diverse human and nonhuman bodies of this world.

The god assumed in this horrid history had little to do with the God described in the Bible. Instead, this was a deist god suited for a world characterized as a mechanism, and thus open to endless manipulation and control. As Willie Jennings notes in *The Christian Imagination*, "the vision born of colonialism articulated a Creator bent on eradicating peoples' ways of life and turning the creation into private property." Rather than creating places and communities of mutual sharing, healing, and deep communion—places in which creatures come to share in God's sabbath rest—colonists and imperialists created a world that fragments, segregates, and commodifies life. Having rejected the logic of creation, we now live in a profoundly lost and disoriented condition that points to "deep psychic cuts and gashes in the social imaginary of western peoples," writes Jennings, "but also to an abiding mutilation of a Christian vision of creation and our own creatureliness."

The mass extinction of species and the wounding of so many of the world's places have prompted some scientists and environmentalists to argue that our cosmos is sacred, even bathed in mystery. This is an important effort because it stands in marked contrast to centuries of teaching that declared the world to be populated by random, valueless stuff. Think here of how scientists, engineers, and financiers have often assumed that this world is open to endless commodification and manipulation. Very little is precious. Most everything can be turned into a source for profit.

But to long for a "sacred cosmos" without a transcendent creator, that is, without the accompanying notions of creation *ex nihilo* and *ex amore*, won't do. Why not? Because it is precisely the idea that God creates in complete freedom, not *on* something or *as* a something, that allows us to say that each creature is a gracious gift and thus is to be cherished and protected as the beloved being that it is. A universe is not a gift if it simply or eternally just *is*. For life to be a sacred gift, we must presuppose a transcendent giver who

creates the conditions in which grace can be at work. If God is not transcendent, then creatures do not find their being and their meaning solely in the divine love that both desires for them to be and commits to be with them in the daily forms of nurture, care, protection, and friendship. Divine transcendence, in other words, establishes the sanctity of creatures. It inspires the prophetic call, “Do not abuse, exploit, or violate life!”

Here it is crucial to recall that God’s transcendence does not speak to a god who is spatially far away. Instead, it speaks to a divine reality that is so unlike our own—finite, imperfect, discrete, complex, etc.—that we cannot fully comprehend or imagine the love that creates and sustains the world. As John of Damascus put it succinctly, “all things are far from God: not in place, but in nature.” This is profoundly good news, because it means that God can be present to each creature not as a competitive or controlling power, but as the enabling and empowering presence that seeks each creature’s good.

Christians believe that the life of Jesus of Nazareth opens a unique space through which all life can be perceived and engaged as the sacred reality that it is. When we attend to Jesus’ various ministries of feeding, healing, forgiving, and reconciling others, we encounter in embodied form the eternal power that has been circulating through all of creation from the beginning. Seeing how Jesus lived his life and the way he moved his body, we also see what creaturely life is fundamentally about and what it is ultimately for.

In Jesus of Nazareth there is the coming together of a fully human and a fully divine life. As a hymn in Colossians puts it, in this man “the fullness of God” came to dwell. But it would be a serious mistake to characterize this coming together in mechanical or causal terms, as if two things are being mixed together to create a third thing. Something much more profound is happening and being presupposed.

First, the incarnation of God in Jesus teaches that creaturely reality is fully open to divine reality. To be in communion with God, creatureliness does not need to become something else, be overcome, or be done away with.

Second, God does not stand at an indifferent remove from creatures. Instead, God abides deeply and desires to dwell intimately with creatures in all their struggles and joys by living in our flesh.

Third, in Jesus’ human flesh we see what it looks like for divine life to be realized here and now in a particular body. In Felix Heinzer’s succinct phrasing, in Jesus we encounter the divine “how” working itself out in the human “what” that we all share. Jesus, in other words, is an embodied site that creates a double opening through which people can peer into and participate in the depths of divine and human life at the same time.

And fourth, the incarnation of God in Christ teaches that Creator and creation do not add up to make two, as if a divine thing and a creaturely thing stand in opposition to each other. Creaturely life is always already a sharing in the divine life, because no creature could exist

at all if God were not intimately present to it at every moment and in every place. What Jesus reveals in the ways that he interacts with other creatures is what complete sharing in the divine life looks like—and the difference to this world such sharing makes.

The Gospels give multiple examples of Jesus embodying and making practical God's creating and sustaining power. Through his body, and through the particular encounters he has with specific others, Jesus performs the divine agency that is present to the whole world in every place and time. When Jesus encounters another, he does not simply see them at a surface level. He perceives the divine power that is always at work within them but is, for a variety of reasons, currently distorted or frustrated. He recognizes that hunger, disease, alienation, guilt, demon possession, violence, and death are obstacles to a life lived maximally. This is why so much of his ministry centers on feeding, healing, befriending, reconciling, forgiving, exorcising, gently touching, and resurrecting people.

Jesus' miracles are not interruptions of nature. They are, instead, acts of liberation that free people from the conditions that impair, distort, or frustrate their ability to be. What Jesus is doing in his ministries is creating a world in which the divine life within creatures can more fully take root and thrive. He is creating—*ex amore*—the practical, communal, and structured environments in which sacred life can be affirmed and cherished. A miracle does not call people into another world from the one that they are currently in. Instead, it calls them to live this life in a new way—because each miracle reveals what life could be if it was no longer frustrated, degraded, or wounded.

The Gospels present Jesus as a hermeneutical key that unlocks what the created world means and what it is for. Ours is a world created by love and for love. This is why creatures respond to love in such powerful and transformative ways. In Jesus' various ministries, sick bodies respond to his touch and are made whole—eyes that had become blind see again, leprosy is cleansed, hemorrhaging bodies stop their bleeding, fevers depart, withered hands are restored, a body with dropsy sees its swelling go down, and dead bodies come to life again.

Creation through Christ teaches that created life flourishes when it is ordered to, and animated by, the self-offering love he embodied. By showing how well creatures (and we ourselves) respond to the exercise of love and care, Jesus reveals that the heart of creaturely life is itself animated by the powers of love and care. This is a power that is gentle insofar as it recognizes creaturely life to be contingent, needy, and vulnerable to suffering and pain. But it is also a strong power that engages and ultimately defeats the violent and death-dealing forces that seek to deform and degrade life.

Of course, given the enormous scope of this power's action, people should not expect to comprehend this power in all of its manifestations; nor should they expect that its realization will always be pleasing or of direct benefit to them. But when people are inspired and animated by the divine power Jesus embodies, their lives will help create the conditions in which the various fruit described by the apostle Paul—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—can grow (Gal. 5:22–23). These are the ideal conditions in which life can be welcomed and nurtured. They are also the best practices that can form people who contribute to the healing of a wounded world.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Creation ex amore.” This article is adapted from the author’s new book, This Sacred Life: Humanity’s Place in a Wounded World, just out from Cambridge University Press. Used by permission.