
Creatio ex Nihilo and the Nearness of Difference

To suggest that a Christian account of human difference would find grounding in the story of creation is hardly surprising. That a narrative about Creator and creation may say *something* about the multifaceted forms of human difference seems self-evident. However, feminist theology has been squeamish about the biblical creation narrative, not only because of certain masculine notions of the Creator God,¹ but also because of the particularities of male and female in the creation account. There is the difficulty of the Yahwist creation account in Genesis 2—especially the provision of woman to man—and the overwhelming binary force of the text, “male and female he created them.”² The connection of feminist theology with

1. That is, the concerns frequently expressed around the image of “artist” or “craftsman” used to describe the creator God. Alternatively, birthing metaphors are still popular among feminists.
2. For instance, in considering the Reformers’ understanding of the male/female creation account in the broader narrative of Genesis 2 and 3, Jane Dempsey Douglass shows how Luther (for the most part) took a step forward in attributing original equality between the sexes, but consequently uses the fall to advocate women’s subjugation as the “express punishment of

ecological studies has given rise to an emphasis on more dignified accounts of the entire created order, while a concentration on broader scientific developments has seen a growing interest in theology's relationship with contemporary science, including scientific accounts of the nature of gender.

What is often assumed in these constructions is an interdependent model of the God/world relationship. There are two main strategic reasons for deploying such a model. First, in order to safeguard contemporary communal conceptions of identity, causality,³ and even epistemology,⁴ it seems God *must* be imagined in a way analogous to human community. That is, conceptions of God are required to maintain harmony and balance with the created order in a horizontal relationship that frees the divine from the oppressiveness of traditional ontology. Second, a God who is in some way dependent on creation is useful for synthesizing scientific discourse with theological language.⁵ In the 1970s, David R. Griffin could confidently announce that “Christians have always needed (whether or not they have recognised this) a doctrine of creation that was consistent with the essence of Christian faith and the best science of the day.”⁶ The implicit enemy in these accounts of creation is the God of antimutuality—the naively Hellenized divine being of the creeds, as encapsulated in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Though the *creatio ex nihilo* doctrine is rarely analyzed with much detail, it is roundly

women which must endure until the end of all time.” See Janet Martin Soskice and Diana Lipton, *Feminism and Theology*, Oxford Readings in Feminism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 87.

3. This is not only in regard to scientific postulations but also the questions of theodicy that preoccupy open and process constructions.
4. For an early example see chapter 5, “Knowing Nature,” in Catharina J. M. Halkes, *New Creation: Christian Feminism and the Renewal of the Earth* (London: SPCK, 1991).
5. It is noteworthy, especially in light of open or process theisms, that models of theology that claim most interest in fluidity and impartiality are often harboring rather obvious priorities for propositional coherency, especially in an interdisciplinary approach.
6. David R. Griffin, “A Process Theology of Creation,” *Mid-Stream* 1–2, (Fall–Winter 1973): 48.

rejected for the brutality and violence it has allegedly inflicted upon humanity, and indeed upon the entire cosmos. Thomas Jay Oord writes,

The God whose unlimited power created something from nothing is capable of completely controlling that which God creates—which is everything. The God who can create *ex nihilo* is essentially capable of creating something from nothing in any present moment to prevent genuine evil. The God who creates *ex nihilo* is culpable for failing to control creatures or creaturely events entirely and/or failing to create instantaneously from nothing that which could prevent genuine evil. In short, *creatio ex nihilo* undermines a coherent doctrine of divine love. Christians should reject this non-biblical idea to affirm consistently the biblical claim “God is Love.”⁷

In contrast to this approach, I want to argue in this chapter that *creatio ex nihilo* is in fact the most hopeful starting point for a Christian account of difference, and I want to show that feminist questions around gender are most fully appreciated and addressed from within the story of God’s creative and re-creative agency. Beginning with the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, and examining in particular the priestly creation account in Genesis 1—and its place within the Christian biblical narrative and tradition—will bring into focus what is at stake in the debate about creation and creaturely difference. Recent process-oriented attempts to account for difference and to liberate creaturely difference fail to consider the underlying grammar of the doctrine of creation and therefore miss an indispensable conceptual resource. For theology, the Creator/creation difference is not only the genesis of difference itself, but also the most viable place from which a broader redemptive account of difference may be developed.

7. William Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 107.

**Catherine Keller: Gender, Difference,
and the Becoming of Creation in Feminist Theology**

For feminists, there is a lot at stake in how society frames a creation metanarrative. It has implications, for instance, for the dignity of women's personhood within Christian communities. Ann Loades identifies four major barriers to affirming the worth of women in Christian theology: the failure to find femininity in God; the insistence that woman is derivative from and hence secondary to man; the assumption that woman is characterized by passivity; and the tendency to identify women with bodiliness as opposed to transcendent mind. In this diagnosis, Loades places particular blame on the creation account, or at least on dominant interpretations of that account.⁸ Concerns surrounding the *imago dei* inevitably lead to further questions about the plight of creation and the destructiveness of dualistic or binary modes of thinking. Thus, feminist theologians have taken to reinterpreting the creation story. Coinciding with a growing concern for the health and future of the earth (in the aftermath of Lynn White's now infamous "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis"⁹), many feminist reinterpretations of the creation account involve a sustained dialogue with ecological and scientific research. In recent decades, the feminist reinterpretation of creation has often taken the form of a pantheistic retelling—an approach that has reached its highest pitch in the sophisticated process theology of Catherine Keller. In order to show how these dual concerns (deconstructing the patriarchal account of creation and engaging with ecological and scientific scholarship) have driven this process-oriented approach with its concomitant dismissal of *creatio ex*

8. Ann Loades, *Feminist Theology: A Reader* (London: SPCK, 1990), 5.

9. Leona M. English, "Revisiting Voice, Subjectivity and Circles: Feminist Pedagogy in the Twenty-First Century," *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 5, no. 2 (2008): 112–25.

nihilo, I will trace the trajectory of feminist theological accounts that leads to Keller's work.

Sallie McFague and the World as God's Body

Sallie McFague's arguments pertaining to metaphoric language are well-known and bear enormous importance for feminist God talk. In applying her arguments to ecological issues, McFague developed parameters around postpatriarchal modes of representing the creative order. She writes, "It would appear that the appropriate language for our time, in the sense of being true to the paradigm of reality in which we actually live, would support ways of understanding the God-world and human-world relationships as open, caring, inclusive, interdependent, changing, mutual, and creative."¹⁰ McFague exposed the limits and dangers of language for God—and of God's relation to the world—by showing how patriarchal systems of domination find footing in the language used for God and "His" relationship with the world. Of particular concern to McFague is the monarchical model for God's relationship to creation. McFague argues that the monarch God is inherently distant from the world (here McFague appeals to Kaufmann's "asymmetrical dualism"¹¹). The monarchical model for God renders the world remote, perhaps even cut off from the divine. This model "supports God as a being existing somewhere apart from the world."¹² Certainly the metaphoric imagery of a king supports this claim. And McFague makes important links with the monarchical God and substitutionary theories of atonement. Further, she observes that this monarchical

10. Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 13.

11. *Ibid.*, 64.

12. *Ibid.*

God interacts only with humans, not with the rest of creation.¹³ Here McFague points to the anthropocentrism of word-focused Protestantism (and interestingly, notes the various strains of the tradition that have asked for a broader cosmological view, even quoting Augustine on this matter). Clearly, there was a need for the theological tradition to take more seriously the ecological crisis of our age, and the anthropocentric emphasis that has dominated theological discourse. As McFague notes, any tradition that cannot include the whole world is sadly lacking.¹⁴ Finally, McFague argues that the mode by which this God controls the world is a system of domination and benevolence. For McFague, such a God encourages passivity in humanity—a passivity that threatens the future of the earth in this “ecological, nuclear age”:

God’s action is on the world, not in it, and it is a kind of action that inhibits human growth and responsibility. . . . No matter how ancient a metaphorical tradition may be and regardless of its credential in Scripture, liturgy, and creedal statements, it still must be discarded if it threatens the continuations of life itself.¹⁵

Though, as I will show, these two ideas—the monarch God and God’s difference from creation—should not be conflated, McFague is right to point to the foundational underpinning of the patriarchal worldview in a specific interpretation of “creation.” However, there is a distinct coadunation here between ideas of sovereignty and creative power. And this argument is made against a particular model, a particular way of reading creation and sovereignty. As McFague narrates her key critiques of the monarchical model (God is distant

13. This was certainly seen as an important challenge toward many “orthodox” descriptions of the God/world relationship, and concepts of ultimate redemption. McFague states, “[the monarch model] is simply blank in terms of what lies outside the human sphere. As a political model focused on governing human beings, it leaves out nine-tenths of reality.” See *ibid.*, 66.

14. *Ibid.*, 67.

15. *Ibid.*, 68, 69.

from the world, God only relates to human subjects, and God controls the world through domination or coercive benevolence), she also moves, without any particular analysis, to reject the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. In rejecting monarchical metaphors (and rightly so, as McFague notes: “If metaphors matter, then one must take them seriously at the level at which they operate”¹⁶), McFague is likewise rejecting the traditional doctrine of creation: *creatio ex nihilo*. If McFague sees this, too, as necessary, there is a peculiar subversion of her own claims regarding the functionality of metaphor, and the need to reimagine ways of speaking God in our time (for instance: Are we to accept that concepts such as omnipotence and creative agency are immovably fixed and not *really* metaphoric language?). In moving toward a discourse of the world as God’s body, McFague offers one response, but her argument fails to necessitate this as the only reasonable response; in fact, her response in my view is not imaginative enough: it has not truly deconstructed the metaphor of creative agency. And yet it has exercised enormous influence.

There are several moves that McFague makes in her reinterpretation that have been vital in the subsequent development of feminist creation thinking. McFague sees an evolutionary model of creation as a means of explaining origins. She sees this model as distinct from the kind of mechanical explanation that she associates with *creatio ex nihilo*.¹⁷ Establishing such a firm binary between these two models ensures that transcendence is also at odds with the “reality” or “truth” of creaturely experience. There is an inherent self-evident logic to these claims in McFague’s (re)telling of creation.¹⁸

16. Ibid., 65.

17. In particular, see *ibid.*, 6–14.

18. There is an ironic twist to McFague’s account of “reality.” Claiming the obvious interdependency of creaturely life and God at a time when humans are suffering unprecedented isolation and increasing atheistic views highlights McFague’s own arguments about subjective God talk and the dangers of analogous projections of the divine.

McFague moves toward viewing the world as God's body. She perceives this as a means of providing due attention to the symbiotic processes of life, and of affirming nature and embodiment in a way that the monarch Creator God never could. The idea of creation as God's body is, to McFague, far "less nonsense than the idea of a disembodied personal God."¹⁹

Catharina J. M. Halkes and the Resacralization of Nature

McFague's work was expanded upon in the creation theology of Catharina J. M. Halkes. In *New Creation: Christian Feminism and the Renewal of the Earth*, Halkes seeks to respond to the World Council of Churches' call for a reconception of the justice, peace, and "becoming-whole" of the earth.²⁰ Like many feminists, Halkes argues that issues of injustice, instability, and ecological disaster can be traced to the overarching paradigm of masculinity and dominion. Tracing the "masculine" through the centuries, she shows how technology (or the technological worldview) was a logical procession from the narrative of divine dominion cemented by the Christian (and masculine) creation account. Thus technology—the modern dominion of nature—is at heart a masculine attempt to order and control the creation. Referring to Bacon's "knowledge is power," and Descartes's "*mâitres et possesseurs*," Halkes remarks of the new nature paradigm, "In the combination of power and capital which this brings about, God's supremacy over creation is put out of action as a matter of principle. The promise of salvation must be realized through conquest."²¹ And she adds that "the old mythical word

19. McFague, *Models of God*, 71.

20. Halkes, *New Creation*, 1.

21. *Ibid.*, 77.

‘subdue the earth’ is fulfilled in technology. . . . For this reason we see in technology a glimmer of that first morning of creation.”²²

Halkes’s thesis implies that the masculine interpretation of creation, passed down through the church, has proven the vehicle for the divinization of the masculine, while nature—understood as feminine—becomes fully the possession of the masculine. Halkes suggests that traditional accounts of creation within the Christian tradition have in fact severed nature’s relationship with the divine. Christianity’s representation of God’s transcendence has “brought about an image of God closed in upon himself, in no way at our side, and far distant from ‘his’ creation.”²³ In other words, God’s transcendence has now become a sign of God’s disconnection from nature, and nature has thus been desacralized and made the object of masculine control. This is an important claim for Halkes, as she goes on to argue for both the re-sacralising of nature and the re-sacralising of women. She takes McFague’s idea of “creation as God’s Body” and uses this as the basis for reconceiving immanence, incarnation, and creation.²⁴ Thus, for Halkes, life in God’s body establishes dignity and freedom for women; likewise, the Eucharist takes on a deeper meaning, and she calls for women’s presiding as a sign of God’s presence in creation.²⁵ More clearly than McFague, Halkes articulates God’s active involvement with the world; yet “the world, as the image of God’s body, remains a risky image, namely, risky for God. It makes God vulnerable. . . . As risky as this image is, so vulnerable is God, and now we must add that this image also appeals to humanity, to our responsibility, to our will to be co-creative, redeeming and healing.”²⁶ In making a connection back to the traditional account of

22. *Ibid.*, 78.

23. *Ibid.*, 86.

24. *Ibid.*, 152.

25. *Ibid.*, 153.

26. *Ibid.*, 155.

creation in Genesis, Halkes describes her thesis as a dream in which “the chaos was still in motion” and “there was no thought of a God creating from nothing, as a hero, only by ‘his’ word.”²⁷ It is at this point that feminist theology opens into a thoroughgoing process account that renounces entirely the doctrinal tradition of *creation ex nihilo*.

In forming her theological account of creation based on an interdependent understanding of the universe, Sallie McFague asked feminists and ecological scholars to make a choice between scientific coherency and transcendent models for God (without asking whether this dichotomy is real or may be contested). In her portrayal of creation as God’s body, she gave Halkes the grammar of a panentheism that Halkes would come to consider as pivotal for “freeing” God from “his dominance and omnipotence.”²⁸ Further, in both of these accounts one sees a certain Western binary understanding of nature—nature as the opposite of history, or nature as the opposite of humanity—being smuggled into the very project of subverting Western patriarchal logic. Such a sharp binary tends to force feminist theology into an impasse; the link between creation and redemption can only be maintained through a rearticulation of redemption that is far more radical than may have been originally envisaged by feminist revisionists.

The Face of the Deep

It is in the work of Catherine Keller that one encounters the most mature and comprehensive alternative to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. In *Face of the Deep*, Keller presents a complex rereading of creation, and brings together the many strands of thought seen in

27. *Ibid.*, 154, 155.

28. *Ibid.*, 156.