

Issue One

To Come From Nothing Is To Reveal God

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Man has known, for as long as he has been, that the things of this world are symbolic. Things express and communicate themselves to be sure—water reveals its nature to flow, the tree reveals its nature to grow toward the light, a rock reveals its nature to fall down toward the earth—but intrinsic to being any kind of self is also to point to a self-transcending reality. The tree points to the previous generations in its line, the rock points to the geological structure of which it was once a part, a particular stream points to its source. To be anything at all in this world of relation and interconnection is simultaneously to point to the existence of something else—that is, to be a symbol.

The symbolic character of things, however, does not stop at the level of immanent source; rather, this intra-worldly level of symbolism itself points to the fact that things are given to represent realities transcendent of this world. We have always known that everything means more, signifies more, than just itself or its lineage.^[1] The sun has never been understood to be simply that thing in our sky that provides light and warmth, but rather a symbol of a reality that transcends us, providing what we need in order to be. Water has never been seen as merely what is necessary for most life, but rather representative of an invisible reality that, like water itself, is both necessary and good, and also dangerous in great quantities—symbolic of a reality which we cannot control and to which we must pay heed. Trees, animals, mountains—the list could go on infinitely. The visible things of this world are themselves, yes, but also always point us to the invisible realities of our world as well.

Things shine forth! They express themselves beyond their own boundaries—this is how we know them. And in expressing themselves, they also express another.

That God creates the world *ex nihilo*, or out of nothing, is one of the central Christian beliefs. Like the doctrine of the incarnation, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* grounds the Christian understanding and interpretation of the world. God does not create the world out of some pre-existent stuff, as so many ancient civilizations understood to be the case; he does not overpower or tame a chaos in order to form something intelligible out of it. Nor does God need to create. There is no lack in God that he must fill by forming something lesser than himself; he does not need to prove his power by taking pre-existent stuff and giving it order. Rather, God creates out of nothing: as Romano Guardini writes, “God speaks, and it is.”^[2] There is nothing prior to creation other than God. He is the only source of everything that is.

Above we said that we have always known that things are symbolic. The revelation that God creates the world *ex nihilo* does not negate this long-understood reality, but rather radically deepens it, almost to the point of absurdity. But Christianity often takes us to edge of the absurd (literally: that which is out of harmony with reason or propriety) only to reveal how radically wonderful our reality is. In this case, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* helps us understand that the things of this world are not just symbolic (this alone would be a gift: to point to what is beyond one’s own boundaries, beyond oneself), but

eucharistic.

Before the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, most cultures understood the world to have come to be out of some combination of the divine and chaos, some unintelligible, pre-existent stuff. But the truly divine cannot come into contact with chaos—this would be against its nature. And so there is a corollary that often comes with an understanding that the divine and the pre-existent are eternally together: this is the demiurge. This is one way around the transcendence question: God and the pre-existent are not on the same level—the most high God barely notices the pre-existent, so to speak, let alone gets involved with it in order to form it into something intelligible. And so a third appears, generally understood to have come from the most high God in some way, but certainly not on his level of transcendence. This demiurge (in the Greek: *dēmiourgos*—*dēmi*: common people, *ergos*: work—a worker for the people) is what gives intelligibility to the pre-existent, not the most high God. According to Plato, this demiurge is a force for the good, taking pity on the *chôra*, the chaos: he “desired that all be good and as far as possible nothing be imperfect. He therefore took everything that was visible, which was not at rest but moving discordantly and randomly, and he led it from disorder to order.”[3] Other traditions, mostly gnostic, take a less exalted view of the demiurge: he is an evil deity who traps bits of transcendence in this stuff we call matter, which seems to be the source of all our ill.

These are two very different conceptions of the demiurge, but they share the belief that there is a third thing between the most high God and the world that we know and inhabit. In both views, God cannot be sullied by the world, or else he would not be God. Transcendence cannot touch anything that even hints of disorder or imperfection, or else we could not “call this God,” to use Thomas’s phrase.[4]

Where does this leave us though? Where does this leave the world we know, and it must be said, love, despite all the trouble it may cause us? God—the actual God—can have nothing to do with us or this world, or indeed anything in it. But this world and what is in it are all we know, literally: it is only through coming to know, understand, and, indeed, love the things of this world that we come to know, understand, and love anything at all. The visible realities of this world are indeed what lead us to invisible realities. Homer can only call the sea “wine-dark,” expressing the excitement and danger the sea holds, because he knows that wine can both heighten and diminish our humanity. He can only express the perversion of humanity that is the Cyclops because he has encountered people who both literally and figuratively have no perspective. And he can only portray the double nature of the reality of marriage—both natural and man-made—in the tree that is Odysseus and Penelope’s bed because he knows the reality of a tree first. It is the things of and in this world that allow us to know and think anything at all. But the existence of the demiurge—that third thing between God and the world—ambiguates all of that knowledge. For what, ultimately, is its significance, if it in no way symbolizes what is eternally good and true? The symbolism of things can only reach so far back, as it were—they can only communicate their maker, the demiurge, not the ultimate ground of reality.

Our vision of reality radically transforms, however, if we understand the true depth and radicality of the doctrine of creation. God creates *ex nihilo*, which means that God creates only of himself.[5] Nothing—no-thing—is outside his purview. Nothing has come to be because of some pre-existent other to God. This transforms our ambivalence into gratitude. There is no other response. There can be no more “x is great, *but*.” There can be no partial negation within our affirmation.[6] “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). In that “and the earth” contains the foundation of our joy and gratitude for the world and everything in it.

Notice another implication: there is no demiurge here. There is no need, so to speak. The demiurge was a necessary figure, a third between the world and what is truly divine because of the need to keep God

transcendent and therefore unsullied by the pre-existent. The demiurge mediates between the divine and the non-divine—whether malevolently or benevolently—and this mediation necessarily implies that not everything in this world is good. If it were, the truly transcendent would be able to come into contact with it. But if creation is *ex nihilo*, entirely from the truly divine, then there is no need to posit this *tertium quid* to keep God’s hands clean. God’s hands are always clean, and the world is their work.

More implications cascade thence: this world and everything in it are then not apart from God, not separated from him. Even in our earlier ambivalence toward the things of this world, we understood intuitively that they were symbolic. This is now radically deepened: in light of the doctrine of creation, we now understand that to be anything means to be symbolic of—to communicate something about—the transcendent reality, that is, of God himself. “My God, my rock” (Ps. 18:2): how could such a comparison not be insulting—blasphemous even—if this were not true? The things of this world are given to reveal the transcendent reality of God. There is no mediator: God alone shines through. So writes Paul: “Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature . . . has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Rom. 1:20). Everything we know as finite is given to reveal the infinite goodness, beauty, and truth that is God.

It is thus the things of this world—the lowly rock, the tree in the forest, the sea that is the source of both life and danger—that reveal what it means to be at all. The world—our world—mediates the divine to us, not some *tertium quid*. Thomas writes that “the measure of the reality of the thing is the measure of its light.”^[7] This small sentence holds volumes. Things shine forth! They express themselves beyond their own boundaries—this is how we know them. And in expressing themselves, they also express another. Intrinsic to the notion of self—which, of course, we use analogically throughout the hierarchy of being—is to be able to communicate the reality within. In the ancient view, this reality was some admixture of chaos and light. But Christians know that this is not the case: the things of this world have only one source, and this we call God. Their reality is wholly dependent, because founded upon, him. This means then that their reality in some sense *is* God. They can only be seen in his light, because they are made up by his light albeit as though refracted through a prism, each reflecting some dimension not otherwise able to be seen by us. Josef Pieper writes: “[B]rightness and radiance is infused into things from the creative mind of God . . . It is this radiance, and this alone, that makes existing things perceptible to human knowledge.”^[8] God—the ultimate reality—is what allows any thing at all to be through creation *ex nihilo*. God shines forth from every single thing.

This does not mean that things aren’t given to be themselves—that is to say, the dignity of any individual thing is not overshadowed by its communication and revelation of the ultimate reality that is God himself. The sun does not cease to be an awesome reality in itself because it is also one of the most powerfully evocative images of God’s nature. Rather, it is just the opposite: the sun is the source of all life precisely because it reveals God as such. The things of this world are not accidentally but constitutively symbolic: their “selves” are only insofar as they are given to reveal an aspect of God.^[9]

Notice too: this means that in a certain sense, all things are infinite. We must qualify carefully here, for it would be incorrect and irresponsible to assert that the things of this world are infinite the way God is. On the other hand, if we take a moment to think of any finite reality at all, from a rock, to the sun, to a single drop of water, we start to notice that every thing has garnered a seemingly infinite amount of human interest and thought. Think about what we know about and can do with rocks. Think of how much more we understand about and can do with water. Things, then, though not infinite in themselves, seem to have an infinite capacity to receive inquiry and an infinite capacity to express intelligibility. How do we explain this?

Pieper writes that “[a]ccording to the doctrine of St. Thomas, it is part of the very nature of things that their knowability cannot be wholly exhausted by any finite intellect because these things are creatures, which means that the very element which makes them capable of being known must necessarily be at the same time the reason why things are unfathomable.”^[10] To know something, anything, is also to know its infinite knowability, to glimpse its depths, and, therefore, to know that it cannot ever be known completely. The things of this world are infinitely expressive and infinitely capacious (the former because the latter, and vice versa).

This infinite capacity of things is only possible because of their source: God himself. Pieper again: “[T]he structure of created reality . . . by definition has its origin from God and also from nothing.”^[11] To be a creature means to have as an origin, ultimately, nothing other than God himself. God does not separate himself from his creation but is closer to it than it is to itself. This is the dignity of things: to receive and express what is beyond their own selves. If this world and everything in it were anything but the simple desire of God for an-other to himself to be, if they were muddled by chaos, then they would not have the capacity to receive and express the ultimate reality himself. But they do, and we see the climax of this infinite capacity and expression in every sacrifice of the mass. “The fruit of the earth and the work of human hands” can communicate the infinite because the infinite—and nothing else—created them.

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[1] We should point out that since the Enlightenment, the symbolic sense of reality has been attacked. Every ancient civilization, and certainly Christendom as well, has understood that the realities we physically encounter in this world represent realities beyond our immediate grasp. There are many factors contributing to the loss of this worldview, but not least is the Enlightenment redefinition of what it means to know something, from understanding something’s causes (in the Aristotelian sense) to knowing how something is made. The former definition of knowledge necessarily points us beyond the thing in itself in order to know it, while the latter does not. However, even though we have mostly lost our sense of the intrinsically symbolic cosmos, it is still the case that if we consider what we intuitively think about what it means to know something (rather than having a so-called “scientific” understanding of something), we might begin to recover our sense of symbolism. After all, even a child implicitly wants to know where a thing *comes from* (its source!) when he asks a question about it.

[2] “Created by God” trans. Rachel M. Coleman in *Communio: International Catholic Review* 42.4 (2015), 784.

[3] *Timaeus*, 30A.

[4] See *ST I. 2. 3, co.*

[5] This is not to say that Christians are pantheists. In fact, the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* helps to explain why God and creation are radically different even as creation only comes to be because God desires it. Most versions of pantheism hold that the world is something like a faded version of the divine, like the very end of a path of a ray of light. In this sense, then, the divine is neither totally transcendent—because the world is just a diluted version thereof—nor totally immanent—because the original source of divinity is elsewhere. In a certain sense, Christianity understands the exact opposite to be the case: God is and can be entirely immanent to his creation because he is so other, or transcendent, to it.

[6] Nor can it be a partial affirmation within a negation, which one might do in the face of the problem of evil. I do not mention evil in this essay, though, of course, a longer treatment of creation and particularly creation *ex nihilo* would need to address the problem of evil. The ancient explanation of most evil coming from the chaos in the beginning does in fact, as I assert in the text, ambiguate the goodness and truth of the world and everything in it, but it also relieves in its own way the problem of pain—at least trying to name a source. Just as creation *ex nihilo* radicalizes our understanding of the symbolic cosmos (that things do not just communicate something about God but indeed God himself), it also reintroduces and radicalizes the problem of evil. Evil can no longer be blamed on the pre-existent chaos but ultimately has man's action as its source, thereby also radicalizing man's place in the cosmos: things do not happen to him; rather, he is entirely responsible for his actions.

[7] *Commentary on 1 Tim.*, vi, 4.

[8] *The Silence of St. Thomas*, trans. John Murray, S.J., and Daniel O'Connor (South Bend: St. Augustine's Press, 1999), 56.

[9] See *ST I*. 47. 1, co. There Thomas explains that multiplicity and diversity in creation exist to reflect the simple and infinite goodness of God, each creature manifesting this in its own distinct way.

[10] *The Silence of St. Thomas*, 60.

[11] *Ibid.*, 67.

