

Ian A. McFarland. *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014. xvii+212 pp. \$35.00 (paper).

Alexander H. Pierce
Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

In *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation*, Ian McFarland presents an intricately argued and theologically attentive account of the Christian doctrine of creation from nothing (*ex nihilo*). McFarland traces the theological origins and contours of this doctrine, suggesting that it has far-reaching implications for much of Christian theology. In this contribution, McFarland builds upon his focus in previous works on human difference and equality. The contention of *From Nothing* is that all creatures—human persons, animals, and plants alike—share in a state of creatureliness according to which they are fundamentally creatures, not God. Along these lines, *From Nothing* is as much an argument for the nature of God's relation to the world as it is a treatment of creation. According to McFarland, the qualitative Creator-creature distinction is the decisive consequence of the doctrine of creation from nothing. So theologically critical is this distinction that he describes the specifically Christian account of this doctrine as "radical." The overarching purpose of this book is to expound just how pervasively significant the Creator-creation distinction is for Christian theology.

McFarland begins the book by specifying the central theological implications of the doctrine of creation from nothing in light of its historical origin. He explains that, although Scripture does not explicitly teach the doctrine, it is an important development within early Christianity. He closely follows Gerhard May's contention that the doctrine arose in the second century as an attempt to affirm God's transcendence against the common claim that "nothing comes from nothing" (5).¹ McFarland argues that divine transcendence does not suggest remoteness from creatures, but instead functions as "the ground for God's engagement with them" (12). Creation's ontological dependence on God allows for God's presence and power within creation. But this proximity and potency form a challenge for contemporary supporters of the doctrine. The pervasiveness of divine power and presence often leads to concerns about the possibility of human freedom as well as the goodness of God given the existence of evil. If God created from nothing, might he not be an autocrat with respect to both good and evil?

McFarland utilizes these two problems as an occasion to address process theologians who argue against God's omnipotence because it is "morally problematic,

¹See Gerhard May, *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought*, trans. A.S. Worrall (2nd ed.; London: T&T Clark, 2004).

scientifically incredible, and incompatible with creaturely freedom” (15). These three objections reveal the central burden at the core of McFarland’s proposal: “divine arbitrariness”—that “an omnipotent God could prevent evil, but doesn’t, could have made creation perfect but didn’t, could bring everyone to glory but won’t” (18). McFarland offers a twofold response—one part logical and the other exegetical—to the problem of divine arbitrariness that “frames” the rest of the book. First, he claims that “God’s transcendence of the Platonic contrast between Being and Becoming,” which he describes as the “metaphysical *discontinuity*” between Creator and creatures, is what allows for God to interact with creatures (19-20).² He explains that the “realm of becoming is ... a gift that is the proper mode ... for creaturely flourishing” (20). Inasmuch as this gift is “utterly unconditioned,” and thus ostensibly maximally arbitrary, McFarland admits that one might still charge God with arbitrariness if God’s goodness remains in question. Against this, McFarland appeals the “Scripture as the definitive witness to God’s identity,” providing a second line of argument, namely, that like with human arbitrariness, appeal can be made to the “character that underlies and shapes” God’s action (21). Drawing upon the prologue to the Gospel of John, he contends that God is utterly sovereign, “the sole precondition and only context for creation.” Yet, alongside this claim, he submits that “creation from nothing ... [should be understood] ... as part of a broader story of God’s ongoing commitment to the life of all that is not God” (23). God is also personal, for insofar as Jesus is God, creation cannot be considered apart from Christology: “evaluating what God does is inseparable from knowing who God is—knowledge that for Christians is inseparable from the person of Jesus Christ” and his work on humanity’s behalf (23).

These two rejoinders unfold together over the course of the book’s two parts—*exitus* (outflow) and *reditus* (return). These two parts make up the artistic whole of McFarland’s treatise. In the first part, McFarland is concerned with “the claim that the world originates in God” and, in the second, with how “God is also the world’s goal and end” (xiii). He describes both parts as “the successive examination of a single idea from different perspectives—the exploration of various facets or aspects of the Christian belief in creation as a reality that is distinct-from-yet-originating-in God” (xiv). To capture a sense of the whole, it is worth following the book’s major contours: *exitus* and *reditus*.

The thematic purpose of the *exitus* part of the book is to disclose “creation’s rootedness in God’s life” (xiii), beginning with McFarland identifying God as “creation’s sole and sufficient ground” (29). We cannot speak of the Christian God, says McFarland, in such a way that we “limit God to a particular set of categories or concepts” (29). McFarland offers four portraits of God, each intended to secure correct thinking about God’s work as the Creator. First, McFarland argues that God is *transcendent*. That God is transcendent is a formal assertion that “highlights our incapacity to say what God is like” (34). However, given human inability, the disclosure of God’s identity in Christ and in the inspired words of Scripture offer the basis for “Christian God-talk” (37). McFarland then describes God as *living* by which he means that God’s being is a trinity of persons in mutual relations characterized by love. God’s life just is diversity within unity. Thirdly, God is *productive*. God’s triunity

² All italicized words in quotations from McFarland belong to McFarland.

posits two eternal instances of intra-trinitarian productivity as “constitutive of God’s identity”: “begetting” and “proceeding” (44). Finally, McFarland characterizes God as *present*, “the mutually productive presence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in self-giving and sustaining love” (49). Together divine productivity and mutual hypostatic presence depict the intra-trinitarian relations in terms of mutual perichoretic presence and self-giving, securing equality among the divine persons.

Whereas God is inherently unconditioned, the sole condition of creation is God. McFarland describes creatures as “other than God,” for God is distinctively living, productive, and present, and creatures are “*contingent*, subject to *movement*, and occupy a particular *place*” (61). He argues that creatures’ dependence on God “establishes the possibility and limit of created life” (63). The contingency, movement, and locality of creatures are the “created corollaries God’s character as living, productive, and present.” These characteristics are also indicative of creatures’ finitude, which results in an irreducible disharmony. Creation cannot be one as God is one, but necessarily bears multiplicity. McFarland also claims that to maintain a Christian view of the world as good requires that it be seen as “a coherent whole, ordered by God for the benefit of creatures” (74). McFarland recommends Maximus the Confessor’s cosmology according to which creation is “grounded in the eternal divine Word (*Logos*)” (81). The one Word, Jesus Christ, as the source and end of all created words (*logoi*), or creatures, renders intelligible the nature and relations of all creatures (82).

McFarland explicates the meaning of “from nothing” by taking an extended look at the prologue to the Gospel of John, using three memorable phrases to signify his basic claims (in *italics*). First, McFarland argues that creation from *nothing but God* eliminates the possibility for metaphysical continuity and simultaneously “affirms the ontological *grounding* of creatures in the inexhaustible richness of God’s own life” (90). He clarifies that by this phrase, in the light of the Johannine prologue, he does not intend to advocate a radical voluntarism. Instead, because the Word both “is God” and is “with God” this phrase is an indication that in the act of creation God’s tri-personal perichoresis breaks forth in an “extradivine expression” (90-91). That nothing but God conditions creation bears the consequence that “there is *nothing apart from God*” (92). McFarland proposes a trinitarian account of God’s omnipotence according to which God’s power is expressed in two symmetrical instances: internally in the Father’s gift of the Father’s own life to the Son and Spirit, and externally, “in the Father’s creating the world through the Son in the power of the Spirit” (96). In the former, divinity is repeated. However, in creation, God’s purpose is “to share the blessing of being with that which is *not* God” (97). If God is the sole condition for everything other than Godself, then *nothing limits God*, for the very existence of creatures is the expression of God’s will (98). The efficacy of God’s will is determined—it cannot be overcome or eluded—yet McFarland softens this claim by invoking the incarnation to explain how God’s power in the created order bears no external limits such that he is even able to take on the life of a creature to “[ensure] creation’s flourishing” (106).

In the *reditus* part of the treatise, McFarland examines creation’s “existence under God” (xiv). Rather than offering a theodicy, McFarland draws on biblical Wisdom literature—Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes—to address the nature of evil. As

that which God does not will, evil is “neither God nor from God” (114). Accordingly, McFarland submits that we cannot explain evil. The reason for this is that evil is an antinomy for God. God cannot be contained because he is omnipresent. Evil, on the other hand, attaches itself to existents, seeks residence despite its inherent non-existence (132). In other words, evil is not a substance in which existents participate, but a privation through which existents testify to the reality of evil. The result of McFarland’s biblical interrogation is a proposal that God permits evil, yet with three qualifications: (1) “evil is not an illusion,” (2) “God does not commit evil,” and (3) “evil is subject to God.” McFarland follows the logic of this permission by suggesting that while God does not will evil even for the sake of the good, he can still “draw good from evil” such that evil “cannot finally defeat God’s will for creatures’ flourishing” (134).

McFarland addresses God’s providence in its three “simultaneously enacted dimensions”—preservation (*conservatio*), concurrence (*concursus*), and government (*gubernatio*). McFarland explicitly avoids the extremes of deism and occasionalism by holding that in “actively sustaining their existence” God grants creatures’ subsistence over time and causal efficacy without impugning his omnipotence (140). The doctrine of concurrence accounts for the compatibility of God as the primary cause “of all creaturely being and doing” with the role of creatures as “secondary causes,” which God uses to produce the same effect (144). Primary and secondary causes “operate on different metaphysical levels” (145). Therefore, either cause provides a sufficient causal explanation independently of the other. The two layers of causality are non-competitive. McFarland works to avoid hard determinism by explaining how this logic applies in “natural law, creaturely freedom, and uncaused events” (151). After rejecting of meliorism (“the idea that creation naturally progresses to ever-better states,” 153) on scientific and theological bases, McFarland innovatively describes God’s governance of creatures as a “basic condition of creaturely existence in time and space” (156). Individual creatures, because of the mutual interdependence with which God has invested them, flourish inasmuch as they contribute in their role as parts of a created whole.

In the final chapter, McFarland claims that since heaven is already experiencing the glory of God’s triune life, there is reason to believe that there are resonances of glory in all of creation. In the incarnation, God glorified matter, causing an intersection between the spheres of heaven and earth. For this reason, McFarland contends, icons justifiably testify to Christ’s resurrection by portraying individuals in their transfigured state. McFarland reasons that because glorification is a movement of God overcoming the ontological distance between God and creatures, the pattern of *exitus* and *reditus* must take God, and not creation, as its subject. For the origination of creation is grounded in God’s decision “to love beyond the bounds of God’s own Trinitarian life” (178), and the return is a return not of the creature to God, but the return of God to the creature. This is an elegant way of revising the classical framework of creatures coming from and returning to their Creator into a narrative more commensurate with the history of redemption in which God sends the Son and Holy Spirit into the world to retrieve his beloved. McFarland describes this divine movement as “an *intensification* of divine presence” (178). He concludes by arguing that creation will therefore not be discarded, but instead “liberated and renewed” (179).

The argumentative thread that persists through McFarland's reflection on God and creation is his argument that God's transcendence and omnipotence are the very grounds for God's love of all created things. He explains how God's power depends on God's identity by contending that "the doctrine of the Trinity clarifies the relationship between God's power to create and God's identity" (187). In creating, God shares his own life. Yet, the act of creation is no arbitrary act. McFarland expressly rejects the worry that God somehow arbitrarily chose this world among others because he denies the anthropomorphism resident in the concern—it implies that God is involved in some kind of discursive reasoning—and he views the objection as a logical mistake, for "in creating from nothing...God makes it that there can be such a thing as the actualization of possibilities" (187). He concludes that worries about divine arbitrariness are therefore "misplaced" (24).

McFarland has shown himself a theological specialist capable of engaging with a wide range of historical sources, applying theological ingenuity and modern sensibilities to some of the most pressing questions of our day. His proposal is relevant for a markedly wide-ranging set of implicit interlocutors, including process, eco-, and analytic theologians. Among the many substantive contributions made by *From Nothing*, I will highlight the two most important.

The first major contribution is McFarland's shrewd development of God's triunity as a resource for understanding the enactment of his power. McFarland's argument for the tripersonal structure of divine omnipotence, grounding God's power in the externalization of his interior productivity and presence, is a creative contribution to ongoing debates over the consequences of God's power. McFarland describes the import of his argument by positing that if God is the "sole antecedent condition of the existence of every creature," then omnipotence is a corollary of creation from nothing so that "every creature exists solely because God wants it to exist" (186). If God willed otherwise, it would not exist. Nothing is beyond God's control or out of his reach. If so, creation from nothing demonstrates that "*everything* is of immediate concern to God" (185). McFarland maintains that we must share God's concern by caring for every part of his creation. It is in attributing integrity to the constituents of creation that McFarland sees the realization of his goal to "promote forms of behavior that enhance the church's witness to the gospel" (186). This consequence of the triune God's power offers a practical solution to process theologians' concerns about the excessive use of power. It also provides a constructive ground for theologically stable eco-theology.

McFarland's second major contribution is his argument for divine transcendence. Among analytic theologians, there is often legitimate concern that appeals to transcendence, rather than offering a real contribution to ongoing discourse on theological predication or divine attributes, reflect nothing but a conceptually thin, apophatic gesticulation. This is not the way McFarland approaches the transcendence of God. Instead, he provides an account of transcendence that is grounded in Christian Scripture and tradition, yet without appealing to them as authorities in a manner that suppresses intellectual inquiry. To the contrary, McFarland builds a substantial case for the fittingness of transcendence and the limits it implies for theological predication. This is of course an area fraught with contention among Christian theologians. For whereas some worry that forcing language down

the analogical road will always lead down the path of equivocation, others worry that without such limitations, God becomes just another being on the creaturely scale of existence. Rather than merely appealing to analogical predication, McFarland offers an account of the metaphysical discontinuity according to which God and creatures bear an inherently non-competitive relation. For McFarland, this metaphysical state of affairs is the basis for analogical predication.

Although *From Nothing* ought to be read carefully by a wide audience, there are two minor concerns worth mentioning. First, many will find that his strict adherence to the work of Gerhard May in his historical typology of the doctrine is unsatisfying. May's understanding of the disjunction between second century Christians and ancient Greek philosophy has undergone substantial scrutiny and the verdict of its historical accuracy is still pending.³ McFarland's theological ingenuity is the second cause for concern. For instance, it is apparent that the questions of our day have played a formative role in his theological expression to such an extent that he characterizes God with novel, eccentric attributes such as living, productive, and present not in addition to classical attributes, but in place of them. The concern here is primarily that McFarland has given up theological ground to assuage the concerns of his interlocutors. As John Webster explains, theological discourse breaks down into two tasks: exposition, which "attempts orderly conceptual representation of the content of the Christian gospel as it is laid out in the scriptural witness," and disputation, which involves "[exploring] the justification and value of Christian truth-claims."⁴ The latter derives from, and should not ground, the former. But McFarland's contribution appears to have blended these projects into one, giving the reader the impression that the constructive work is laden with an apologetic agenda that may or may not dissuade readers from embracing his proposal.

Despite these residual concerns, I happily commend *From Nothing* to the court of analytic theology. The book offers a sprawling explanation of the nature and implications God's transcendence understood as ontological remoteness. For McFarland, God's transcendence is, contrary to what many assume, a condition for maintaining God's love for, and presence in, creation. In my estimation, McFarland's *From Nothing* is a book that theologians, especially those coming from process, eco-, and analytic perspectives, must take up and read.

³E.g., Markus Bockmuehl, "Creatio Ex Nihilo in Palestinian Judaism and Early Christianity," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65:3 (2012): 253-70.

⁴John Webster, "On the Theology of Providence," in *The Providence of God: Deus Habet Consilium*, ed., Francesca Aran Murphy and Philip G. Ziegler (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 161.