

THE STRANGE ENDLESS UNIVERSE COSMOLOGY OF OPEN THEISM

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Open theism is a problematic theological paradigm that shares foundational elements with pantheism and process theology. Not only have open theists incorporated secular evolutionary theories into their system of thought, but most open theists have also found it necessary to reject the biblical concept of creation from nothing, or creation *ex nihilo*. The reason for this rejection is primarily due to the fact that creation *ex nihilo* fundamentally presupposes an omnipotent Creator who brings to pass whatever He chooses and that his purposes are never frustrated. Open theism, however, believes that God has no exhaustive foreknowledge and that his creation does regularly frustrate his purposes. In place of creation *ex nihilo*, many open theists propose an endless universe with multiple cycles of big bang creation events in which God is repeatedly making worldly creations from chaos in a strange cyclic steady-state cosmology. In support of the biblical doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, this article will demonstrate how it is both scientifically and scripturally valid, and that denial of this doctrine is yet another unorthodox tenant of the open theist community that must be rejected.

WHAT IS OPEN THEISM

Open theism is a theological position that fundamentally negates the orthodox reformed view that God is sovereign, totally omniscient, immutable, transcendent, and immanent (in a biblical model). Much of the open theist system bears close similarity to the Socinian controversy that developed during the era of Calvin and the Geneva reformers in which God's foreordination and exhaustive foreknowledge was challenged.¹ The most prominent literary effort that birthed open theism to a larger evangelical audience was a book by four different authors (Pinnock, Rice,

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¹ John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001) 32-36.

Sanders, Hasker, and Basinger) published in 1994 titled “The Openness of God”.² Two orthodox theologians (Bruce A. Ware and John M. Frame) separately published their own lengthy refutations of open theism in the early 2000s which are recommended for a more detailed study of the general subject.³

OPEN THEISM AND THE PROBLEM OF CREATION *EX NIHILLO*

The philosophical roots of open theism are based in panentheism and process theology which is described in more detail in a companion article.⁴ In fact, the current leading proponent and organizer of open theism conferences and publications, Thomas J. Oord, is a former graduate student of process theologian David R. Griffin. While early proponents of open theism generally evaded the issue of origins, Oord, Griffin, and others have in recent years attempted to integrate their paradigm more thoroughly with evolutionary ideas concerning origins, which is discussed in the previously mentioned companion article, “Open Theism: An Open Door to Evolution.”⁵

Ultimately, science and theology must intersect around the ultimate first cause of the universe. From the very first verse, the Bible declares, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1) and then systematically describes the creation of the world in six days.⁶ The initial verse of the Bible, along with others that we will be discussed, clearly indicate a creation from nothing or as stated in Latin, *ex nihilo*. The open theist community largely rejects this essential biblical truth. One of the current leading proponents of open theism, Thomas Jay Oord, stated the fundamental problem of creation *ex nihilo* for the open theist system. “If God can single-handedly bring something from nothing, God can single-handedly prevent genuinely evil events. A perfectly loving God would always work to prevent genuine evil, if preventing such evil

² Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994).

³ Frame, *No Other God*; Bruce A. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000).

⁴ Jeffrey P. Tomkins, “Open Theism: An Open Door for Evolution,” *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 27 (Spring 2023): 63-78.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Jeffrey P. Tomkins, “The Creation Week: A Systems-Based Approach,” *Acts & Facts* 51 (January-February 2022): 18.

were possible. An adequate view of the origin of the universe seems to require a theory of divine power that accounts both for the big bang and for why our loving God does not prevent the occurrence of genuine evil.”⁷

Oord is a leader amongst a new generation of liberal theologians leading the charge to dismantle creation *ex nihilo* for the open theist community. Oord’s alternative thesis is best summarized in his chapter, “An Open Theology Doctrine of Creation” in the book *Creation Made Free*.⁸ In his efforts, and by his own confession, he has relied heavily on ideas from his former doctoral advisor and process theologian, David Ray Griffin. In fact, Griffin published his own book several years after Oord’s effort, *Panentheism and Scientific Naturalism*, which puts forth the same general ideas promoted by Oord.⁹

The primary problem with creation *ex nihilo* for open theists is that it implies that God has the kind of sovereign power that makes him guilty for failing to prevent the occurrences of genuine evil in the world. A God who has the power to create the universe from absolutely nothing should also have absolute power to prevent evil in the world. Thus, according to Oord, Griffin, and others, God therefore must not have that kind of power. Furthermore, from the physical world’s side of the equation, open theists purport that it is believed that if creation *ex nihilo* is indeed true, the world itself has no inherent power of its own in which it could resist or frustrate the divine will, and God could unilaterally determine creaturely actions and also arbitrarily suspend the laws of nature at his will. Griffin stated, “If God is said to have created the world out of absolute nothingness . . . the origin of evil cannot be explained, at least without implying that God’s goodness is less than perfect.”¹⁰

⁷ Thomas Jay Oord, “An Open Theology Doctrine of Creation,” in *Creation Made Free: Open Theology Engaging Science*, gen. ed. idem (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009) 41.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ David Ray Griffin, *Panentheism and Scientific Naturalism: Rethinking Evil, Morality, Religious Experience, Religious Pluralism, and the Academic Study of Religion* (Claremont, CA: Process Century Press, 2014).

¹⁰ David Ray Griffin, “Creation out of Nothing, Creation Out of Chaos, and the Problem of Evil,” in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theodicy*, gen. ed. Stephen T. Davis (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001) 114.

CREATION FROM CHAOSMOS?

Griffin's alternative to creation *ex nihilo*, is that the universe began from a preexisting form of relative chaos that some open theists like to call a "chaosmos" derived from a previous universe (i.e. a sort of cosmological reincarnation). Griffin explained, "that between the decay of the previous cosmic epoch and the beginning of the present one . . . there would have been no social order, no societies—no electrons, protons, photons, or even quarks."¹¹ Griffin actually postulates an evolutionary process of his own imagination borrowing some lingo from modern astrophysicists that will be discussed later, saying, "The first stage of the creation of our cosmic epoch . . . would have involved the formation of very low-grade serially-ordered societies (perhaps quarks) out of such a chaotic state. Later stages would have involved the creation of more complex societies out of these simpler ones."¹²

Ultimately, Griffin's cosmological paradigm negates the open theist problem of divine power: "There was no stage at which God could unilaterally determine the states of affairs. . . . Divine creativity can never obliterate or override the creativity of the creatures."¹³ Thus, this lesser God of open theism would, in theory, be unable to negate or override the libertarian freedom of creatures because even at the creation (recreation) of each universe, He cannot be held suspect for failing to override creaturely freedom or prevent genuine evil at any time in the entire history of the universe. This is all not to say that God lacks any creative power because Griffin believes that God can set in place laws and constraints for any particular universe in its initial moments. However, he does not have the capacity to control other laws (e.g. biological evolution) at any time prior or after. In proposing this idea, Griffin argued that his limited design thesis fits well with the central notions of fine-tuning that most modern cosmologists affirm.

Yet another open theist and process theologian to enter the fray on attacking the pesky problem of creation *ex nihilo* is Catherine Keller, whom Oord said, her "work on creation and divine power is particularly relevant."¹⁴ Keller's writings in *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*, like Griffin, denies creation *ex nihilo* and assumes some sort of

¹¹ David Ray Griffin, *Reenchantment Without Supernaturalism: A Process Philosophy of Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001) 137.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Oord, "An Open Theology Doctrine of Creation," 43.

chaos saying, “that the universe was created from a primal chaos: something uncreated, something Other, something that a creator could mold, form, or call to order.”¹⁵ Keller claims that the orthodox *ex nihilo* theology that came to dominate the early church rejected similar ideas like hers because such thinking “could not tolerate this constraint upon God’s power: for why should ‘He’ have had to reckon with an Other?” She continued, “This prevenient chaos cramped the growling Christian imagery of mastery—what we may call its dominology, its logos of lordship.”¹⁶ The idea of a creation or of some form of chaos or chaotic material in the open theist community was even promoted by Clark Pinnock much earlier in the emergence of open theism who noted, “I agree with process theology exegetically that Genesis 1 does not itself teach *ex nihilo* creation but presents God as imposing order on chaos.”¹⁷

Keller called her alternative to creation *ex nihilo* a tehomic theology of creation *ex profundis* (from the depths). Her terminology is a play upon the Hebrew in Genesis 1:2 where it says darkness was upon the face of the deep [*tehom*] which despite the qualifier in Genesis 1:3 that explains it as “waters,” Keller used it as a launching point to the alleged chaos from which God created. To pull this idea abstractly into open theism, Keller’s tehomic theology claims this it is fundamentally relational at its core, such that God “remains enmeshed in the vulnerabilities and potentialities of an indeterminate creativity.”¹⁸ In accordance with the overall paradigm of open theism, Keller claims that God is locked into this process in the sequence of time in the integral Creator-creation relationship. Ultimately, Keller claimed her tehomic theology is “a theological alternative to the dangerously unavowed amorality of omnipotence.”¹⁹

AN ENDLESS UNIVERSE?

Based on the work by Griffin and Keller, Oord is pushing forth the agenda of the supposed science of an endless universe in the open theist community, which apparently many of his contemporary colleagues find agreement. Amazingly, however, this paradigm still finds a way to

¹⁵ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003) 42.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 42.

¹⁷ Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2001) 146.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 226.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 49.

accommodate the modern secular big-bang cosmology by insisting, “This everlastingly relational and persuasive God would need to be powerful enough, however, to initiate the big bang of our universe and every universe before and after.”²⁰ In making such a claim, Oord borrowed ideas from physicist John Barrow who claimed, “the universe undergoes a cyclic history, periodically disappearing in a great conflagration before reappearing phoenix-like from the ashes.”²¹ Oord thus likes the idea that the big bang can be regarded as being part of an endless cycle of emerging and re-emerging universes, each with new materials and new free creaturely entities. Oord cited cosmologists Steinhardt and Turok who claimed, “The cyclic tale pictures a universe in which galaxies, stars, and life have been formed over and over again long before the most recent big bang, and will be remade cycle after cycle far into the future.”²² In concluding his thesis on an endless cyclic big-bang cosmology, which amounts to nothing more than a strange variant of a steady-state (eternal universe) cosmology, Oord concluded that this idea is, “purposive, proanthropic, and hopeful” and “this version of a cyclic universe is compatible, I believe, with Open theology’s claim that God is Creator.”²³ Interestingly, Origen an early church theologian who was known for a variety of unorthodox beliefs, also promoted an eternal universe with multiple creations.²⁴

OPEN THEIST REJECTION OF CREATION *EX NIHILO*

While not all open theists agree on the exact same cosmology, the current thrust of open theism is to reject the proposition that God created *ex nihilo* at some level. While a few open theists may claim to accept creation *ex nihilo*, Oord best summarized the landscape saying, “Although some Open theologians affirm creation *ex nihilo*, nearly all know that the opening

²⁰ Oord, “An Open Theology Doctrine of Creation,” 45.

²¹ John D. Barrow, “The Far, Far Future,” in *The Far-Future Universe: Eschatology From a Cosmic Perspective*, gen. ed. George F. R. Ellis (Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation, 2002) 30.

²² Paul J. Steinhardt and Neil Turok, *Endless Universe: Beyond the Big Bang* (New York: Doubleday, 2007) 226.

²³ Oord, “An Open Theology Doctrine of Creation,” 49.

²⁴ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997) 1:553.

verses of Genesis do not refer to an absolute nothingness from which God allegedly created.”²⁵

Alan Rhoda, an open theist and philosopher, defined what he believes is the orthodox version of *creation ex nihilo* that he actually opposes, “I define ‘broadly classical theism’ as the view that there is a unique personal being (God) who exists necessarily, who possesses a maximal set of compossible great-making properties, including omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness, and who created the world *ex nihilo* and can unilaterally intervene in it as he pleases.”²⁶ Classical theists would largely accept all of this idea, along with an expansion of God’s attributes. The implication of God’s total and pervasive sovereignty in the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo* as acknowledged by Rhoda is what makes it especially distasteful to open theists, as noted by Oord who said, “The omni-sovereignty of God was an especially important element in *creation ex nihilo*.”²⁷

Richard Rice is one of the minority voices in the open theist community that promotes *creation ex nihilo* and blames the influence of process theologians as the main impetus for it being rejected.²⁸ In addition to Rice, several other open theists that affirm some variant of *creation ex nihilo* put forth their views in a more recent volume edited by Oord, specifically dealing with the issue.²⁹ While Rice and several other authors put forth some variant of *creation ex nihilo* in an open theist framework, Oord wrote an introductory and concluding chapter denouncing *creation ex nihilo* and pushing his idea of an endless and cyclic deified creation previously mentioned. In his concluding comments in the book, Oord said, “The alternative creation theory I offer affirms an everlasting chain consisting of creatures and universes God creates” and “God’s relentless creating in love means that God has endlessly been creating new creatures from those God [*sic*] created previously.” Oord’s statements further deny God’s ability to create *ex nihilo* in his basic proposition that God always needs some sort of preexisting material when He creates anything. Of

²⁵ Oord, “An Open Theology Doctrine of Creation,” 39.

²⁶ Alan R. Rhoda, “The Fivefold Openness of the Future,” in *God in an Open Universe: Science, Metaphysics, and Open Theism*, eds. William Hasker, Thomas Jay Oord, and Dean Zimmerman (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011) 69 fn1.

²⁷ Oord, “An Open Theology Doctrine of Creation,” 40.

²⁸ Richard Rice, “It’s Not all About Nothing,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 47 (Fall 2012): 110-23.

²⁹ Thomas Jay Oord, gen. ed., *Theologies of Creation: Creation Ex Nihilo and Its New Rivals* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

course, the majority of the other contributing authors to the book affirm a similar theology on creation in harmony with Oord (with some minor variation).

IS *EX NIHILO* A PAGAN GREEK CONCEPT?

As with many open theist arguments, they like to claim that the ideas of classical theism are a combination of biblical teaching and pagan Greek philosophy, and that open theist arguments are more biblical. In response to the historical fact that *ex nihilo* has been a historic teaching since the early days of the early church when it was taught by Irenaeus (ca. AD 130-202), Oord made the following comment: “The doctrine [*ex nihilo*] fit well with the Neo-platonic doctrine of God gaining influence in the early Christianity.”³⁰ In his work debunking open theism, John Frame has shown that this is not the case. He said, “The open theist’s comparisons between Greek philosophy and classical theism are not always convincing.”³¹ Frame then demonstrated how similar the open theist reasoning concerning creation is in comparison to various Greek philosophers: “The earliest Greek philosophers, such as Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes, sought to explain the world order and process without reference to gods. So their worldview did not allow for a personal being who controls the world by an eternal plan. The world functions on its own, autonomously, and the philosopher comes to understand that world autonomously, using reason apart from divine revelation.”³²

In regard to Oord and other open theist’s concept that the universe is endless and cyclic, their cosmology is actually nearly identical to ideas promoted by the dualism of pagan Greeks while the early church asserted the biblical doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Louis Berkhof noted, “While Greek philosophy sought the explanation of the world in a dualism, which involves the eternity of matter, or in a process of emanation, which makes the world the outward manifestation of God, the Christian Church from the very beginning taught the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* and as a free act of God.”³³ In regard to the open theist rhetoric that *ex nihilo* could also mean God creating from some preexisting primordial material, Berkhof seemed to be well ahead of the open theist perspective in his day (1950s) because

³⁰ Oord, “An Open Theology Doctrine of Creation,” 40.

³¹ John Frame, *No Other God*, 31.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. (1939; reprint, Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 2021) 117.

other non-orthodox theologians were attempting the same line of thought. Berkhof said, “The expression *ex nihilo* has been both misinterpreted and criticized. Some even considered the word *nihilum* (nothing) as the designation of a certain matter out of which the world was created, a matter without qualities and without form. But this is too puerile [childishly silly and trivial] to be worthy of serious consideration.”³⁴ Theologian John Murray likewise denounced the dualism of a preexisting matter and connected it to the sovereignty of God. “The doctrine of creation affects the sole eternity and universal sovereignty of God. If anything exists apart from the creative will of God, then we must posit something alongside of God and independent of Him, and then we have adopted a dualism that cuts athwart the sole eternity, sole self-existence and universal sovereignty of God. And this means that he is not God.”³⁵

Berkhof further elaborated on the unbiblical system of dualism that is essentially identical to the strange cyclic steady-state cosmology of many open theists and again connected it to ancient pagan Greek philosophy. “Dualism is not always presented in the same form, but in its most usual form posits two self-existent principles, God and matter, which are distinct from and co-eternal with each other. Original matter, however, is regarded as but a negative and imperfect substance (sometimes regarded as evil), which is subordinate to God and is made the instrument of His will (Plato, Aristotle, the Gnostics, the Manichaeans). According to this theory God is not the creator, but only the framer and artificer of the world.” Indeed, Oord claimed that the “New Testament passages say God creates from something” and he cited as further support Bruce Waltke’s unorthodox rendering of God creating from a preexisting primordial chaos. Waltke’s work is a questionable effort involving a controversial Hebrew exegesis of Genesis 1, combined with the fact that he utterly neglected important New Testament passages that provide further light on the matter.³⁶

In support of the biblical uniqueness of creation *ex nihilo* and its non-likeness to Greek thought, surprisingly, William G. T. Shedd addressed the subject in the late 1800s. Shedd said, “Creation *ex nihilo* is peculiar to the Scriptures. It is not found even in the most rational and spiritual of the ancient cosmogonies. Even when an intelligent architect of the universe is

³⁴ Ibid. 124.

³⁵ John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 1976) 1:326-27.

³⁶ Bruce K. Waltke, “The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1: Part III: The Initial Chaos Theory and the Precreation Chaos Theory,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132 (July 1975): 216-28.

affirmed, as in the systems of Plato and Aristotle, an eternal hylē, or chaotic matter, is postulated, out of which it is formed. Philo (On the World) takes the same view. In the Platonic writings, God is rather a demiurge than a Creator. Plutarch (Procreation of the Soul) describes Plato's view as follows: "The creation was not out of nothing, but out of matter wanting beauty and perfection, like the rude materials of a house lying first in a confused heap."³⁷ Shedd's comment is particularly insightful because many open theists, like Oord, claim a creation process from a preexisting chaos or "chaosmos" as they call it. Oord and others base this claim that the "deep" or *tehom* is a form of chaos in Genesis 1:2 that existed prior to creation.

CREATION EX NIHILO – AN ORTHODOX BIBLICAL DOCTRINE

As part of their rhetoric and anti-*ex nihilo* arguments, open theists like to claim that certain features of their theological system are well-supported by other theologians and scholars. Oord has claimed, "A large number of Bible scholars reject the idea that Genesis describes creatio *ex nihilo*."³⁸ However, is this really the case? If one looks at the history of orthodox theism, he or she will actually find that support for *ex nihilo* is pervasive. A chronological sampling of quotes follows.³⁹

Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo (AD 401) – "And aught else besides Thee was there not, whereof Thou mightest create them, O God, One Trinity, and Trine Unity; and therefore out of nothing didst Thou create heaven and earth."⁴⁰

John Calvin (1554) – "He [Moses in Gen 1:1] moreover teaches by the word "created," that what before did not exist was now made;

³⁷ William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd ed., gen. ed. Alan W. Gomes (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1888; reprint, Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003) 366.

³⁸ Oord, *Theologies of Creation*, 109. The so-called Bible scholars that Oord did cite for supporting his views on creation are some of the most extreme liberals in the field and far from being orthodox theists.

³⁹ For additional proof, see Christopher Cone, "The History of Biblical/Scientific Creationism in the Church," in *The Genesis Factor*, comp. ed. Ron J. Bigalke Jr. (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2008) 21-40.

⁴⁰ Saint Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. E. B. Pusey (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1996).

for he has not used the term “yatsar”, which signifies to frame or forms but “bara”, which signifies to create. Therefore his meaning is, that the world was made out of nothing”⁴¹

Westminster Confession of Faith (1649) – “It pleased God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, for the manifestation of the glory of his eternal power, wisdom, and goodness, in the beginning, to create, or make of nothing, the world, and all things therein, whether visible or invisible, in the space of six days, and all very good.”⁴²

John Dick (1850) – Concerning the Greek of Hebrews 11:3 (μη ἐκ φαινομένων τὸ βλεπόμενον γεγονέναι) wrote, “Now, remark, that the Apostle would have suggested a different idea, had he used the phrase, ἐκ μη φαινομένων; for he would have intimated, that visible things were made of things invisible, which might have been supposed to signify the dark original chaos of the Heathens. But the expression, μη ἐκ φαινομένων, imports something very different, a denial that the universe was formed out of pre-existing matter. In other words, the worlds, according to the Apostle, were made out of nothing.”⁴³

Charles Hodge (1871) – “The Scriptural doctrine therefore is, (1.) That the universe is not eternal. It began to be. (2.) It was not formed out of any preëxistence or substance; but was created *ex nihilo*.”⁴⁴

Robert L. Dabney (1878) – “But let me distinctly premise, that both the existence and essence, or the being and properties of every created thing, originated out of nothing, in the mere will and power of God”⁴⁵

⁴¹ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, 22 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009) 1:70.

⁴² Westminster Assembly, *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Edinburgh Edition) (1649; reprint, Glasgow, SCO: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1985) 31.

⁴³ John Dick, *Lectures on Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: M. W. Dodd, 1850) 1:377.

⁴⁴ Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:553.

⁴⁵ Robert L. Dabney, *Syllabus and Notes of the Course of Systematic and Polemic Theology*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Presbyterian Publishing Company, 1878) 278.

William G. T. Shedd (1888) – “Creation, in the proper sense of origination *ex nihilo*, is the very first work that God does ad extra. Nothing precedes it, except that eternal activity in the divine essence which results in the trinitarian persons. These latter are not creations, but emanations. Hence creation is called ‘the beginning of God’s way’ (Prov. 8:22); and God is said to have created the heaven and earth ‘in the beginning’ (Gen. 1:1).”⁴⁶

Herman Bavinck (1895) – “And by creation it meant that act of God through which, by his sovereign will, he brought the entire world out of nonbeing into a being that is distinct from his own being.”⁴⁷

Augustus H. Strong (1907) – “By creation we mean that free act of the triune God by which in the beginning for his own glory he made, without the use of preexisting materials, the whole visible and invisible universe” and “the world was not made out of sensible and preëxisting material, but by the direct fiat of omnipotence.”⁴⁸

J. Oliver Buswell (1962) – “That the Biblical writers conceived of creation as an act of God *ex nihilo*, not from previously existing materials, is evident from the fact that nowhere among the many references to creation is there the slightest suggestion of the use of anything, or of the existence of anything, prior to creation.”⁴⁹

Robert L. Reymond (2002) – “Of course, this doctrine [creation *ex nihilo*] is not taught only in Genesis; it is affirmed scores and scores of times throughout the Scriptures, but it does place the theological integrity of these other verses in jeopardy if the one account which deals explicitly with the creation of the universe allows for, if it does not in fact teach, the eternity of matter.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 366.

⁴⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 1:253.

⁴⁸ Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1907) 371, 377.

⁴⁹ James Oliver Buswell Jr., *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962) 1:135.

⁵⁰ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998) 385.

Rolland McCune (2009) – “Theologically, creation was accomplished without the use of preexisting materials. It was accomplished *ex nihilo* (out of nothing).”⁵¹

Millard J. Erickson (2013) – “We begin our examination of the doctrine of creation by noting that it is creation out of nothing, or without the use of preexisting materials.”⁵²

John M. Frame (2013) – “Original creation is, strictly speaking, the only creation *ex nihilo*, ‘out of nothing.’”⁵³

Wayne Grudem (2020) – “The Bible clearly requires us to believe that God created the universe out of nothing. (Sometimes the Latin phrase *ex nihilo*, ‘out of nothing’ is used; it is then said that the Bible teaches creation *ex nihilo*.) This means that before God began to create the universe, nothing else existed except God himself.”⁵⁴

DEFINING CREATION *EX NIHILLO*

What exactly is the fundamental meaning of the biblical doctrine of *ex nihilo*? This Genesis-based proposition answers two age-old questions, “What is the material cause of the universe?” and “From what did God make the world?” In short, the answer to both questions is “nothing.” However, what is “nothing”? Philosophically speaking, any definition or paradigm describing *nothing* could actually make it something.

Some philosophers and theologians have thought that it could be more descriptive to speak of creation *into nothing* instead of *from nothing*. While both ideas are helpful, one needs to understand that creation is neither “from” a preexisting material nor is it “into” a preexisting place. In this regard, theologian John Frame said, “we must oppose both the Aristotelian notion of an eternal ‘matter’ and the Platonic notion of an

⁵¹ Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity*, 3 vols. (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2009) 1:333.

⁵² Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013) 340.

⁵³ John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013) 185.

⁵⁴ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020) 338.

eternal 'receptacle,'" which were popular ancient pagan Greek philosophies.⁵⁵ Yet another false view is the proposition that the universe is merely an extension or emanation of God himself. This idea is known as pantheism, where creation and God are one – making creation itself divine.

How can one best understand the idea that an *ex nihilo* creation came from a transcendent God? Instead of saying that God created the world from nothing, it might be better to say that God created the universe without any preexisting material. Berkhof said, "However, in view of the fact that the expression 'creation out of nothing' is liable to misunderstanding, and has often been misunderstood, it is preferable to speak of creation without the use of pre-existing material."⁵⁶ As the Scriptures indicate, God spoke and things appeared, including space and time (a medium) for all created things to occupy and in which to function. When one constructs creation *ex nihilo* in this way, it requires no definition of *nothing*; it simply refutes the nonbiblical view that God created the universe from preexisting stuff. In this sense, creation *ex nihilo* can be thought of philosophically as a negative proposition which affirms that the world was neither made from preexisting finite material nor is it a pantheistic extension of God's being. Thus, since there are no other alternatives, the universe was *not made from anything*; it was made from nothing (*ex nihilo*). This view is the position of historic orthodox Christianity and was widely held in the early church. Berkhof stated, "'To create' was understood in the early Church in the strict sense of 'to bring forth something out of nothing.'"⁵⁷

EVOLUTION EX NIHILLO?

Amazingly, evolutionists have often criticized creationists for the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* as being unscientific while they maintain their own version of evolution *ex nihilo* without a Creator or logical first cause.⁵⁸ The biblical creation doctrine quite logically maintains that an infinite, omnipotent, omniscient, transcendent, self-existing Creator God who upholds and personally interacts with his creation (immanence) is the source and first cause of the universe. Evolutionists, however, have no reasonable source or first cause for their paradigm of big bang *ex nihilo*

⁵⁵ Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 193.

⁵⁶ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 125.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 119.

⁵⁸ Henry M. Morris, "Evolution *Ex Nihilo*," *Acts & Facts* 40 (September 2011): 4-5.

cosmology (evolution *ex nihilo*). Even worse, a considerable amount of astronomical scientific data has now refuted the so-called evidence for a big bang and an ancient universe.⁵⁹

One of the first modern physicists to promote evolution *ex nihilo* was Edward P. Tryon who recounted the whole affair saying, “In 1973, I proposed that our Universe had been created spontaneously from nothing (*ex nihilo*), as a result of established principles of physics. This proposal variously struck people as preposterous, enchanting, or both.”⁶⁰ In a 2002 *Discover* magazine article, the idea of evolution *ex nihilo* was well summarized by an article highlighting an interview with theoretical physicist Alan Guth. “The primordial ‘stuff’ of inflation [aftereffect of the big bang], he and other cosmologists contend, is very likely a spontaneous creation, a no-strings gift that boiled out of absolutely nowhere by means of an utterly random but nonetheless scientifically possible process.”⁶¹

Lawrence Krauss, a theoretical physicist and cosmologist, published *A Universe from Nothing* in 2012 with the final chapter contributed by well-known atheist Richard Dawkins.⁶² The ideas Krauss promoted in his book (and other sources) have received strong criticism with astronomer Luke Barnes saying, “First and foremost, I’m getting really rather sick of cosmologists talking about universes being created out of *nothing*. Krauss repeatedly talked about universes coming out of nothing, particles coming out of nothing, different types of nothing, nothing being unstable. This is nonsense.”⁶³

⁵⁹ Jake Hebert and Brian Thomas, “Does Science Support the Big Bang?,” *Acts & Facts* 43 (July 2014): 21; Jake Hebert, “Does the Cosmic Microwave Background Confirm the Big Bang?,” *Acts & Facts* 47 (June 2018): 10-12; Jake Hebert, “Our Young Solar System,” *Acts & Facts* 47 (September 2018): 10-13; Jake Hebert, “Deep-Space Objects Are Young,” *Acts & Facts* 48 (September 2019): 10-13; Jake Hebert, “Continuing Troubles for the Big Bang Model,” *Acts & Facts* 48 (November 2019): 10-13; Jake Hebert, “Does the Universe Look Old?” *Acts & Facts* 50 (October 2021): 19; Jake Hebert, “James Webb Telescope vs. the Big Bang,” *Acts & Facts* 51 (November-December 2022): 14-17.

⁶⁰ Edward P. Tryon, “What Made the World?,” *New Scientist* 101 (8 March 1984): 14.

⁶¹ Brad Lemley and Larry Fink, “Guth’s Grand Guess,” *Discover* 23 (April 2002): 32-39.

⁶² Lawrence M. Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing* (New York: Free Press, 2012).

⁶³ Luke Barnes, “Of Nothing” [online] (Letters to Nature, 1 April 2011, accessed 27 October 2022) available from <https://letterstonature.wordpress.com/2011/04/01/of-nothing>.

What Krauss and other theoretical physicists are really meaning when they refer to nothingness is the theoretical idea of a quantum vacuum. If a quantum vacuum did actually exist (according to theoretical physicists), it would be wrong to consider it nothing for it would be a type of something; it would have properties, it would have energy (albeit very little), it would fluctuate, it could contribute to the alleged expansion of the universe (now in doubt), and it would obey the complex equations of quantum field theory. In returning to the argument of nothingness, one could describe it as having certain properties. In other words, it is wrong to regard the quantum vacuum as “nothing” and this type of hypothesis leads to a view of the sudden appearance of the universe that is essentially nothing more than a fortuitous accident.

Nevertheless, theoretical physicists seem to be quite enamored with evolution *ex nihilo* and a quantum vacuum, beginning with Edward Tryon who said, “So I conjectured that our Universe had its physical origin as a quantum fluctuation of some pre-existing true vacuum, or state of nothingness.”⁶⁴ Even more absurd is a statement made by Alan Guth: “Theoretically, anything—a dog, a house, a planet—can pop into existence by means of this quantum quirk, which physicists call a vacuum fluctuation.”⁶⁵ Krauss said, “that we all literally emerged from quantum nothingness” and “This is so strikingly nonintuitive that it can seem almost magical.”⁶⁶ Henry Morris, the founder of the Institute for Creation Research, best summarized the efforts of modern evolutionary cosmologists when he said, “Regardless of the sophisticated mathematical apparatus leading the inflationary-universe cosmogonists to their remarkable statement of faith in the omnipotence of nothingness, there will continue to be a few realists who prefer the creationist alternative: ‘In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.’”⁶⁷

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The first verse of the Bible (Gen 1:1) gives the foundational truth of faith and the fundamental reality concerning the universe: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The use of the phrase “heavens and the earth” means the entire universe; and, in the list of all the things believers are to understand by faith in Hebrews 11, the first thing noted is

⁶⁴ Tryon, “What Made the World?”

⁶⁵ Lemley and Fink, “Guth’s Grand Guess.”

⁶⁶ Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing*.

⁶⁷ Morris, “[Evolution Ex Nihilo.](#)”

the creation of all things by the word of God (v. 3) which says, “By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.” Thus, one is to receive by faith the supreme truth that everything in this present universe was brought into existence from nothing by the good pleasure and will of God (as stated in Gen 1).

The supreme truth that God created the universe from nothing (*ex nihilo*) is not only mentioned in Hebrews 11:3, but this ability is inferred in Romans 4:17, where God “calls those things which do not exist as though they did.” The English Standard Version (ESV) of the Bible says, “calls into existence the things that do not exist” and the note for this verse in the *ESV Study Bible* states, “which underscores the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* or ‘out of nothing.’ Before God created the universe (Gen. 1:1), only God existed, nothing else. Paul uses this general truth to affirm the great power of the God whom Abraham trusted: Abraham believed in a God who could raise the dead and summon into existence what did not exist (e.g., new life in Sarah’s womb).”⁶⁸ In Colossians 1:16, it says, Christ created (Gk. *ektithē*) “all things visible and invisible,” which teaches that God creates all visible things as well as the invisible spirits of angels and men. In the apocryphal 2 Maccabees 7:28, it is said “God made the heaven and earth of things that are not [*ex ouk ontōn*].”

The idea of creation *ex nihilo* (and related to God speaking) is affirmed in Psalm 33:6, 9 where the Scriptures say, “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth. . . . For He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast.” When God speaks something into existence (like the universe that did not previously exist), what is implied? First, nothingness cannot beget nothingness. The same idea is also suggested in 2 Corinthians 4:6 (“For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness”). In this case, it is not meant that darkness is the stuff of which light is made, but that the state or condition of things in which light is made to begin is by God’s decree. God is the great First Cause and source of the entire universe, which is traditionally called the cosmological argument in apologetics.

The key problem for open theists with *ex nihilo* is the inherent idea built into the paradigm that God is totally sovereign, which goes against the concept of total libertarian freedom of creatures. Open theism also entails the reduced sovereignty of God based on the idea that He has no foreknowledge, only omniscience of the past and present. Ultimately, this

⁶⁸ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008) 2164.

quest for a theology of autonomy is the basis for the original rebellion of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. However, a biblical doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* teaches the absolute sovereignty of God and man's absolute dependence.

Bavinck aptly summarized the historic importance of *ex nihilo* in the church, namely its importance in guarding against idolatrous pagan beliefs. "The expression *ex nihilo* was eagerly preserved in Christian theology only because it was admirably suited for cutting off all sorts of errors at the root. In the first place, it served as a defense against the paganistic notion of a formless stuff (*amorphos hylē*), from which not even Plato and Aristotle were able to extricate themselves. In paganism a human being is bound by matter, subject to sensuality and nature worship; he cannot grasp the idea that the mind is free and above matter, and even much less that God is absolutely sovereign, defined by nothing other than his own essence."⁶⁹ Indeed, the Apostle John ended his first epistle which contained a strong admonition against Gnostic and naturalistic thinking with the phrase, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen."

⁶⁹ Bavinck, *Systematic Theology*, 2:419-20.