

EX DEO: PLOTINUS, ORIGEN, AND MACDONALD'S DOCTRINE OF CREATION

A SECTION FROM:

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OF GEORGE MACDONALD'S MYSTICISM

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According to William Raeper, MacDonald believed that “men and women were born out of the heart of God, not *Ex Nihilo* as traditionally held by the church, and thus MacDonald aligned himself with the Neo-Platonic theories of Plotinus and Origen” (Raeper 1987:243). MacDonald operated under the shadow of Plato; thus not only will MacDonald's view be explored, but also be compared and contrasted with the neo-platonic doctrines of Plotinus and Origen.

It is believed by most scholars that in the second and third century A.D Ammonius Saccas of Alexandria taught his students the rudimentary knowledge of what will later be dubbed Neo-Platonism. While not much is known of Ammonius since he has no extant writings, there is no doubt, simply by an understanding of his students' teachings, that he subscribed to the teachings of Plato, or at least a personal interpretation thereof (Riddle 2008:46). This Platonic influence manifested itself into two of his most influential students: Origen and Plotinus.

While Origen did hold to a creation of matter *Ex Nihilo* (De Principiis II.1.5), one can quickly see the Platonic influence on his view of creation in his Commentary on John, “We must ask about this; whether, when the saints were living a blessed life apart from matter and from any body, the dragon, falling from the pure life, became fit to be bound in matter and in a body, so that the Lord could say, speaking through storm and clouds, This is the beginning of the creation of God, made for His angels to mock” (I.17). Similarly to Plato, Origen held to a pre-existence of the soul before the placement of that soul into matter. Before this physical world began, we lived in a spiritual realm with God, and originally “He created all whom He made equal and alike” (De Principiis II.9.6). It was only through the free will of these rational creatures that diversity had been caused. (De Principiis II.9.6). It's also likely that Origen believed in an infinite regress of

ever-recurring existences, which falls in-line with Plato's contention that the world is coeternal with the *Demiurgos*. Origen writes "we say that not then for the first time did God begin to work when He made this visible world; but as, after its destruction, there will be another world, so also we believe that others existed before the present came into being" (De Principiis III.5.3).

Where Origen's doctrine of creation intrigues the devotees of MacDonald is where he dips his toes into the pool of emanationism. But, unlike Plotinus and MacDonald who chronologically followed him, Origen only suggested creation *Ex Deo* for God alone. John Riddle explains, "Origen's theory of emanation, derived from Plato, provided imagery that could help explain how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit could be one God in three persons" (Riddle 2008: 46). Origen explained in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, "One might assert, and with reason, that God Himself is the beginning of all things, and might go on to say, as is plain, that the Father is the beginning of the Son; and the demiurge the beginning of the works of the demiurge, and that God in a word is the beginning of all that exists... In the Word one may see the Son, and because He is in the Father He may be said to be in the beginning" (I.17). Thus, in his view, Jesus emanated from the Father, and the Holy Spirit originated in Christ. Origen explained, "But we for our part are convinced that there are three distinct existents-Father, Son and Holy Spirit- and we do not believe any of these is unbegotten except the Father" (Wiles 2001:78). Of course, this would more than ruffle a few feathers of third century theologians, especially when Origen argued that the "Holy Spirit was brought into being through the Word [Christ], and the Word is senior to him" (Wiles 2001:78). Thus implying that there is a true ontological subordination in the Trinity. While Origen's ideas led to heresy in the early church, there is the grounding of emanationism, which leads us to another one of Ammonius' students: Plotinus.

Plotinus' concept of emanationism was not limited to the divine, but branched out into all creation. Norman Geisler states categorically "Plotinus' God created the world *Ex Deo* (out of himself) out of a necessary and emanational unfolding and not *Ex Nihilo* (out of nothing)" (Geisler 2003:153). In Plotinus' own words: "the One is perfect and...has overflowed, and its exuberance has produced the new" (*Enneads* V.2.1). For the uninitiated, many would take Plotinus' ideas to directly lead to pantheism, but this is not the case, especially in the strict sense of the word. He elucidated his position, "The One is all things and no one of them; the source of all things is not all things; all things are its possession— running back, so to speak, to it— or, more correctly, not yet so, they will be." (V.2.1) The fact of the matter is that Plotinus' "One," while a complex idea, is an ontologically simple and an utterly inexplicable source. The One produces its effect, but the effect is different from its begetter due to the complexity of the creation, "For the Universe is not a Principle and Source: it springs from a source, and that source cannot be the All or anything belonging to the All, since it is to generate the All, and must be not a plurality but the Source of plurality, since universally a begetting power is less complex than the begotten" (III.8.9). Plotinus also states more simply: "the produced thing is deficient by the very addition, by being less simplex, by standing one step away from the Authentic" (II.6.1). Brandon Zimmerman explains, "There is an ontological gulf between the One and all modes of being that are derived from him, a gulf which words and concepts cannot bridge. Plotinus often expresses this paradoxically by saying that the One is all things in that they come from him, and is nothing in that he is none of the beings that come from him and has none of the limiting characteristics of a being or a substance" (Zimmerman 2009:15-6).

Plotinus did ask himself, "from such a unity as we have declared The One to be, how does anything at all come into substantial existence, any multiplicity, dyad, or number?" (V.1.6).

In laymen terms, ‘How did the One create?’ It becomes clear in his fifth Ennead that the One produces the Divine Mind, or the Intellectual-Principle or *Nous*, which he stated, “stands as the image of The One” (V.1.7). Then this mind, since it is not devoid of creativity like the One, produces the soul. Plotinus explained, “what is left is the phase of the soul which we have declared to be an image of the Divine Intellect, retaining some light from that sun, while it pours downward upon the sphere of magnitudes (that is, of Matter) the light playing about itself which is generated from its own nature” (V.3.9). So, to use the two analogies that Plotinus oft utilized, the *Nous* is the image of the One, and the soul the image of the *Nous*; or the *Nous* is like a ray of sun from the One, and the soul is sunlight of the *Nous*.

To review: in Origen, the substance by which God creates, in relation to the two other persons of the Trinity, is *Ex Deo*. The Father begets Jesus, and then the Holy Spirit is thus created, all out of his own eternal substance. In Plotinus, the One emanates the *Nous*, then the *Nous* creates the soul, and the lesser realm of matter, and in it’s own image or reflection. Yet how does MacDonald compare?

Dale Nelson states categorically, “MacDonald and Boehme believe God dwells in nature, and that nature proceeds from God, rather than being created out of nothing” (Nelson 1989:28). Rollan Hein explains how MacDonald rejects the traditional view of creation, “Man in his subconscious being, therefore, does not exist independently from God. God made man out of himself...and man lives and moves and has his being in God...Thus MacDonald repudiates the doctrine of creation *Ex Nihilo* which Augustine taught, and which many orthodox theologians have believed” (Hein 1989:47).

In MacDonald’s *Castle Parable*, one of his characters prays, “We thank thee that we have a father, and not a maker; that thou hast begotten us, and not moulded us as images of clay; that

we have come forth of thy heart, and have not been fashioned by thy hands. It must be so. Only the heart of a father is able to create. We rejoice in it, and bless thee that we know it. We thank thee for thyself. Be what thou art--our root and life, our beginning and end, our all in all.” (MacDonald 1999:233). While it seems like MacDonald’s doctrine of creation stands in stark contrast to the Biblical account of Gen 2:7 and 3:19, he argues that his view of creation *Ex Deo* is Biblically based. We find an explication of MacDonald’s theory of creation in his commentary of Romans 8:19 where the scripture reads “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.” MacDonald comments on the Biblical passage, “I am inclined to believe the apostle regarded the whole visible creation as, in far differing degrees of consciousness, a live outcome from the heart of the living one, who is all in all” (MacDonald 2012b:90). In *A Dish of Orts* MacDonald explains, “In the New Testament there is a higher form used to express the relation in which we stand to him- ‘we are his offspring;’ not the work of his hand, but the children that came forth from his heart”(MacDonald 1895:246).

In survey of MacDonald’s doctrine of creation, it would appear as though he believed that the entire physical world was *Ex Deo*, “Our own poet Goldsmith, with the high instinct of genius, speaks of God having ‘loved us into being.’ Now I think this is not only true with regard to man, but also true likewise with regard to the world in which we live. [It’s] not merely a thing which God hath made...but is an expression of the thought, the feeling, the heart of God himself.” (MacDonald 1895:246) But in other areas, he suggests that his doctrine may be more limited: “Perhaps the precious things of the earth, the coal and the diamonds, the iron and clay and gold, may be said to have come from his hands; but the live things come from his heart- from near the same region whence ourselves we came” (MacDonald 2012a:278). It’s possible that he still continued to hold the entire world as a creation out of the heart of God, but simply did not find it

worth arguing the point; yet the concept that living beings were *Ex Deo* was absolutely worthy of dispute. So again, in his commentary on Romans 8:19: “Such view, at the same time, I do not care to insist upon; I only care to argue that the word *creature* or *creation* must include everything in creation that has sentient life” (MacDonald 2012b:90).

In further research, it appears as if, for MacDonald, there is no third option: either God created out of himself or there is no God. For God must either exist, and we are created out of Him, or he does not exist at all, and we’ve spontaneously come into existence out of nothingness. MacDonald states, “If we came out of nothing, we could not invent the idea of a God--could we, Robert? Nothing would be our God. If we come from God, nothing is more natural, nothing so natural, as to want him, and when we have not got him, to try to find him.--What if he should be in us after all, and working in us this way? just this very way of crying out after him?”(MacDonald 2005:277). And again he explains, “Only, if man and Nature came both out of nothing, why should they not be nothing to each other? Why should not man be nothing to himself?” (MacDonald 1991:260). While this includes some speculation, it’s almost as if MacDonald saw creation out of nothing as an illogical phrase, as if it were a category mistake. If there was truly “nothing,” God would not exist, thus God would not be there to create. To consider these ideas more deeply, consider this extended passage from *The Dish of Orts* (MacDonald 1895:3) in an entry entitled “The Imagination”:

Poet means *maker*. We must not forget, however, that between creator and poet lies the one unpassable gulf which distinguishes—far be it from us to say *divides*—all that is God's from all that is man's; a gulf teeming with infinite revelations, but a gulf over which no man can pass to find out God, although God needs not to pass over it to find man; the gulf between that which calls, and that which is thus called into being; between that which makes in its own image and that which is made in that image. It is better to keep the word *creation* for that calling out of nothing which is the imagination of God; except it be as an occasional symbolic expression, whose daring is fully recognized, of the likeness of man's work to the work of his maker. The necessary unlikeness between the creator and the created holds within it the equally necessary

likeness of the thing made to him who makes it, and so of the work of the made to the work of the maker. When therefore, refusing to employ the word *creation* of the work of man, we yet use the word *imagination* of the work of God, we cannot be said to dare at all. It is only to give the name of man's faculty to that power after which and by which it was fashioned. The imagination of man is made in the image of the imagination of God. Everything of man must have been of God first; and it will help much towards our understanding of the imagination and its functions in man if we first succeed in regarding aright the imagination of God, in which the imagination of man lives and moves and has its being.

In the passage above, MacDonald has no qualms stating that when God created, he called us out of nothing. At first understanding, one may find it contentious that here he makes no qualms in using *Ex Nihilo* style language, yet, it must be firmly denoted that MacDonald qualifies the word “nothing” as the “imagination of God.” In MacDonald’s view, God created from his imagination. God called his creatures, which did not pre-exist, nor are made of God’s own essence, into existence.

One must wonder why MacDonald used the verbiage “He makes them, not out of nothing, but out of Himself” in most of his passages on creation. This idea was not a fleeting concept that arose once in MacDonald’s mind, then passed on. MacDonald specifically, and I would argue intentionally, used this wording in many of his works. I contend that this diction was used for two specific reasons: First, MacDonald wanted to demonstrate and remind us that God’s creative process is quite different and much more glorious than when man, figuratively, ‘brings things into existence.’ As MacDonald explained, “better to keep the word *creation* for that calling out of nothing which is the imagination of God; except it be as an occasional symbolic expression” (MacDonald 1895:3). No man creates something out of his heart in the same way that God does. When the poet uses the term “create”, it can only be used figuratively. As Gisela Kreglinger writes, “He goes out of his way to differentiate clearly between the creative activity of God and human

creativity. MacDonald establishes God as the one who created the world out of nothing and mankind as part of God's creation" (Kreglinger 2014:84).

Secondly, MacDonald often wanted to remind the reader of the direct and intimate relational ties between God and his creation. As has been successfully argued elsewhere (Hindmarsh 1991), MacDonald was a Christian mystic who accentuated God's immanence and fatherhood. Man is no mere accident of nature, but is the offspring of God. In MacDonald's own words, "For God is the heritage of the soul in the ownness of origin; man is the offspring of his making will, of his life; God himself is his birth-place; God is the self that makes the soul able to say *I too, I myself*. This absolute unspeakable bliss of the creature is that for which the Son died, for which the Father suffered with him. Then only is life itself; then only is it right, is it one; then only is it as designed and necessitated by the eternal life-outgiving Life" (MacDonald 2012a:189). David Robb beautifully illustrates this intimacy, "His belief that the world is a book, given pattern and significance by a writer-god...[suggests] the nearness and intimacy which MacDonald sought for in his understanding of God" (Robb 1987:53).

Lastly, it must be noted that some casual readers of MacDonald falsely conclude that being created "out of God's own heart" indicates that he was a pantheist. While subsequent research in my dissertation will be able to demonstrate this fact, it can be stated here, categorically, that MacDonald did not indicate in any of his works that creation *Ex Deo* was dissemination, or an emanation, of God's essence into his creation. Not even Origen or Plotinus suggests such a strong emanationism, yet MacDonald is sometimes credited with this position, albeit without merit. In conclusion, while it is still legitimate to claim that MacDonald held to creation *Ex Deo*, it cannot be stated in the traditional sense of the term. Like many of his other assessments, his view of creation was not ontological in nature, but rather, MacDonald's *Ex Deo*

was focused on the primacy and the complexity of God's creative, imaginative process, as well as the relational implications of creator and his new creation.

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