Chapter 3

What the Idea of Creation Means

We have suggested in our previous chapters that the doctrine of creation concerns that fundamental relation between God and the world on which depends the other significant ideas that make up the Christian Gospel. The next task, therefore, is to try to understand just what this doctrine says about God and the world. Then we can draw out the implications of this concept for Christian theology and for our own personal existence, and discuss from a common background certain problems it raises. The meaning of a doctrine can initially be found best by a review of the history of its development and use. Our question in this chapter will be, then, what has the doctrine of creation ex nihilo meant for the Christian thinkers who have affirmed it?

Since the idea of creation has always been regarded as one of the fundamental concepts of Christian thought, it has appeared in every period of Christian history, and has been interpreted from the point of view of every variety of Christian theology. Sometimes it turns up as a conclusion of "Christian philosophy," as in a few early apologists, St. Thomas, and the Christian rationalists; sometimes as a revealed truth found in Holy Scripture and sacred tradition, as in Irenaeus, Tertullian, Augustine, and the Reformers; and sometimes as an implication of religious experience, as in Schleiermacher and the liberals. And, like a versatile actor, it seems able to don a limitless variety of philosophical costumes; at times it wears the idealism of Platonism (Origen, Augustine); next it appears in the more hard-headed thought of Aristotle (Thomas); then it may forsake these for the simple anthropomorphic categories of the Bible (Luther and Calvin), only to turn up later in the semianthropism of romanticism (Schleiermacher). This multiplicity of roles and costumes has led some critics to conclude that there is more variety than unity.
in the idea of creation. It seemed that this idea in history merely repeats in religious language the various divergent, and probably mutually contradictory, meanings of contemporary philosophical schools. Thus, it is said, there is no such thing as a "theological idea of creation" with its own intrinsic pattern of meaning; rather the theological idea is at each stage only a pious and pale reflection of the development of the history of metaphysical philosophy.

Surprisingly enough, a closer study of the development of Christian thought reveals a very different picture. What is especially striking is that despite the variety we have mentioned, there is one consistent theological idea of creation that finds expression in the theologies of every period. With regard to the fundamental relation of God to the world, almost the entire tradition of Christian thought is in substantial agreement. Apparently Christian theologians, when they wrote about creation, wished to express the same idea, and in order to do so they used concepts from the most potent and useful philosophies of their own time and place. The variety thus lies on the surface, in the differing philosophical tools each theologian employed to organize his thought. Behind this variety and expressed through it, there stands an integral and unique attitude toward God and toward existence which is derived from Christian faith and is fundamental to it. This central theological idea that runs consistently throughout Christian history is the object of our inquiry here: it is the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo. Let us look at two brief statements of this doctrine from two widely different periods, noting that the same fundamental ideas are expressed in each statement:

It is proper, then, that I should begin with the first and most important head, that is, God the Creator, who made the heaven and the earth, and all the things that are therein . . . and to demonstrate that there is nothing either above Him or after Him; nor that, influenced by anyone, but of His own free will He created all things, since He is the only God, the only Lord, the only Creator, the only Father, alone containing all things, and Himself commanding all things into existence. 1 (Irenaeus)

For this, as I have elsewhere observed, though not the principle, is yet, in the order of nature, the first lesson of faith, to remember that, whithersoever we turn our eyes, all the things which we behold are works of God . . . Thence we shall learn that God,

by the power of His Word and Spirit, created out of nothing the heaven and the earth; that from them He produced all things, animate and inanimate. 2 (Calvin)

A useful summary of the main ideas in these two quotations, from Irenaeus in the second century and Calvin in the sixteenth, as in a host of others from Christian history, might be as follows: creatio ex nihilo means that God brought the finite world into being out of nothing through a "purposive" act of His free will. Upon analysis of this statement we find three main concepts that make up the idea of creation. They are: 1) God alone is the source of all that there is in the created universe. 2) Creatures, i.e., the finite world of created things, have a being or existence which is at one and the same time dependent upon God, and yet is real, coherent and "good." 3) The action of God, the source, in creating the world is to be understood primarily in terms of the concepts of freedom and purpose. Let us, then, follow these three affirmations as the outline for our discussion of the meaning of the idea of creation.

"GOD IS THE SOURCE OF ALL THAT THERE IS."

Religious communities at the outset are seldom intellectually conscious of all they believe. Many of their most fundamental affirmations lie below the plane of clear intellectual formulation on the level of attitudes and deep convictions. These affirmations do not "come to the surface" as precise ideas until some other view threatens to take their place. Then, realizing that this new idea does not fit its own deep convictions or perhaps even contradicts them, the religious community for the first time formulates its own belief in opposition. Usually it takes the heretic to create the theologian—a fact which professional theologians should remember with more gratitude than is their wont. The result is that most theological doctrines or dogmas have a negative character; their content seems to be mainly a denial of an opposing pattern of thought. As intellectual formulations, this is their central origin and character, and all their exactness and precision resides in this negative role of denial. However, underneath every doctrine lies the deeper level of positive conviction and attitude which the dogma seeks to express and defend. To understand a doctrine, therefore, we must first of all understand
what it denies, and then seek to understand the deep positive affirmation that it hopes to preserve.

This development is certainly well illustrated by the history of the idea of creation. As their Scriptures amply reveal, both Jews and Christians believed that God was the Almighty Lord of every creature, that no aspect of existence escaped His sovereign rule, or could long defy His effective power. And they realized that this total sovereignty of "the Lord" implied that He was the creator of all things: "He Who stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain," as the Second Isaiah said, and "the Maker of heaven and earth," as the earliest Christian rule of faith stated. But the full implications of this belief in the divine creation were not completely realized by Christian minds until they found themselves confronting, both within and without the community of the Church, interpretations of creation which clearly denied many of the things that they believed on this subject. Consequently the doctrine of creation which resulted from this confrontation was a formulation that performed two rather distinct functions, that looked, so to speak, in two directions. On the one hand, its primary role was to deny the ideas that seemed to oppose Christian convictions, and, on the other, it attempted to give some intellectual expression to those convictions. The formula thus derived is the doctrine of "creation out of nothing," creatio ex nihilo. Its main emphasis and its main precision of meaning reside in its relation to the two opposing views of creation which it repudiates, the viewpoint of dualism and that of monism or pantheism. However, it also points to positive Christian affirmations of great religious importance about God and His creatures. To understand this doctrine, therefore, both in its development historically and in its meaning, we must first of all see what it set out to deny.

The most common conception of creation in the Hellenistic world in which Christians found themselves, can be roughly called the "dualistic" view. This view has had a long and distinguished history in religious and philosophical thought. In mythological form it appears in almost all the creation myths of the Near East, India, and the Far East, where a God of order subdues some monster or principle of chaos. It reappeared in the dramatic Orphic cosmologies, then was purified into the familiar Platonic picture of creation in the "Timaeus," and thence provided the groundwork for Aristotle's cosmology. In Christian times it formed the philosophical basis for most of the "Gnostic" systems with which Christianity carried on a life-death struggle until orthodox thought had successfully formulated its own, antidualistic view of creation. It has reappeared in our own time in perhaps its most impressive form in the philosophy of Whitehead.

For this view, reality is composed of two essentially different sorts of ingredients. First, there are the principles of organization in things, the formal structure of an object that makes it what it is, e.g., the structure of a chair that makes it "sittable" and therefore a chair; the structure of a man that makes him a "rational animal" and therefore a man. These structural elements of reality, without which no thing could be itself, were called by the Greeks forms or ideas. In order, however, for anything to exist, there needs to be more than structure or pattern. A contrary principle is needed; something that is to be structured, some unformed stuff that is to be organized. For example, some wood that can be made into a chair, and a body that can be ensouled—these must be there if particular things such as chairs and men are to exist. Thus opposed to forms or ideas there is in existence a passive, material principle: that which itself has no shape but which receives form and shape. Creation, then, or the "coming to be of things," is a process in which forms shape or organize matter; existing things come to be out of the union of these two mutually independent and yet complementary principles. This process of creation may have happened at a "far off event" as in Plato's "Timaeus," when a third figure, the Demiurge, unites the eternal ideas with passive "chaos" or matter to form the world: or it may be a divinely moved eternal process of the union and the separation of the two eternally subsistent principles of matter and form, as in Aristotle. In either case reality is viewed "dualistically," because there are two equal and primary principles in the universe, and existing things are made "out of matter" by the imposition on that material of pre-existent form.

It can be easily seen that this dualistic view reflects the making or creating that characterizes man's artistic and productive experience. When he makes something, or "creates" a work of art, man shapes in a new way some stuff, be it wood, stone, clay, paint or musical notes. His activity is genuinely creative; but his work presupposes a given material stuff to be reworked, and even given forms, either from nature or from his imaginative experience of nature, which are regrouped. For human beings "to create" means to impose upon a given material a form it had not possessed before. It never can
mean to produce either the material itself or all relevant forms. Plato's Demiurge, who shaped the world out of chaos while gazing at the eternal ideas above him, is a cosmic projection of the Athenian artist, shaping new beauty and new order out of the "chaos" of Greek marble. Probably most people think this analogy of "making" is what Christianity means by the idea of creation; like some great carpenter or engineer, God made the universe by thus forming it out of chaos.

When they came to ponder what they believed, however, Christian thinkers were sure that they did not mean this dualistic view by their idea of creation. For this view contradicted two basic affirmations about God and His world which lay at the very foundations of Christian convictions. The first of these was that God was the Almighty Sovereign of all of existence. But in a dualistic view of creation, God is only one among two or more equally fundamental and primary principles in reality. Whether the divine is considered to be the formal, structural principle, or a third craftsman or Demiurge, in either case He is not the source of the existence or being of things, but only their organizer. He fashions and shapes a principle outside Himself which already "is." That principle is, therefore, as self-sufficient and as eternal, as fundamental in reality and being, as He is; and thus it is a principle which everlasting stands over against God, limiting His sovereignty and rule over existence. In a dualistic world view God is always finite, restricted by an antithetical principle or principles of equal stature and power. And as Christians almost universally agreed, such a limited God was the God neither of the Jewish Scriptures nor of the Christian community.

Secondly, a metaphysical dualism in which one principle is "divine" and the other principle not, always tends to become a moral dualism, in which all good comes from the divine and all evil from the opposing principle. Thus in later Greek thought, the source of goodness and fulfillment lay in the formal order of life, and the source of evil in the material, chaotic elements of reality. The world of space and time, of material changing things, of bodily desires and passions, and personal love, of death and decay, seemed therefore to the later Greek mind to be a world of evil. This evil is, moreover, necessary and unconquerable. Since existence is a unity of these two everlasting principles, one of which always brings chaos and passion in its train, existence itself is necessarily evil. The upper world of spirit is a realm of goodness; but the realm of history and communal life is a realm of everlasting meaninglessness and tragedy. By understanding reality as a union of opposing principles, one of which is divine and the other chaotic, dualism seems to make the presence of evil in life rational; but by the same token it can hardly avoid the gloomy conclusion that existence is by its nature inevitably a mixture of evil with good. And this contradicted another basic Christian conviction: namely, that all of creation was in essence and so in possibility good, and hence that evil, far from being a necessity in life, is the result of man's freedom. As Augustine said against the Manichean dualists, "Evil is not a substance; it is the perversion of a nature that is essentially good."

For these two reasons Christian thinkers formulated their doctrine of creation as a specific rejection of the dualism of their Greek environment, for they rightly felt that their belief affirmed something very different. As the essence of dualism was the idea that God created "out of matter," so the Christian formula stated that God created the world ex nihilo: not out of matter but out of nothing. By this phrase they asserted negatively that there was no complementary and equally fundamental principle of matter or chaos, out of which God created things, which could limit His sovereign rule and power. The formula ex nihilo, therefore, specifically denied the preexistent matter, the finite God, and the necessary evil of dualism.

Positively, their formula was much more subtle. Certainly Christian thinkers were not by its means trying to give a positive description of the process of creation, as if God had used "nothing" instead of matter in creation. As a matter of fact, by saying "out of nothing" they were affirming that such a literal, positive description by man is impossible since the only kind of "creating" he can experience and describe is creating "out of something." But they were making two positive theological assertions of great significance.

First of all, by creatio ex nihilo they were affirming that God was the sole source of all existence. This was implied in something they already knew, namely, that God was the sole sovereign Lord of existence. As their experience with dualism had taught them, if any aspect of reality, e.g., its matter, is independent of God's creative power, then His sovereignty is limited. Then there are in effect two Gods, because two eternal and self-sufficient sources of existence. If, therefore, God is to be called the Lord of all, He must also be said to be the source of all; every aspect of existence must be essentially dependent upon His power as the ground and basis of its being. In saying, "He created out of nothing," therefore, they asserted positively
that, because there is no alien subsistence “out of which” He creates, everything that is, in all its aspects, comes to be solely from the power and being of God. Nothing “precedes” God on which He works; nothing is “given” to Him in creation. He is the source of all because He alone is Lord and God. In other words, they had discovered that in order to express the traditional monotheism of the Jewish and Christian religions, they must, in speaking of creation, insist on creation out of nothing. Monotheism necessarily required that no other principle than God, coequal or coeternal with God, is involved in the process of creation. The first positive meaning of the formula \textit{ex nihilo}, then, implied that in creation God was the sole source of all existence, rather than merely its organizing principle. This line of argument is clearly stated by Tertullian around A.D. 210:

The fact of God being the One and only God asserts this rule, for He is the One-only God for the only reason that He is the sole God, and the sole God for the only reason that nothing existed with Him. Thus He must also be the First, since all things are posterior to Him; all things are posterior to Him for the reason that all things are by Him; all things are by Him for the reason that they are from nothing . . . for there was no power, no material, no nature of another substance which assisted Him.

The second positive implication of their idea of creation was that since all that is comes from God’s will as its sole source, nothing in existence can be intrinsically evil. Every factor or principle that we find in our experience of things, their material, their dynamic, and their formal elements alike, come from God as products of His will. Thus nothing is by its nature essentially separate or removed from God, or beyond His power and control. In rejecting dualism, therefore, the formula \textit{ex nihilo} asserted at one and the same time the essential goodness of all that is, and its capacity by nature to be directed and transformed by God’s recreative power. The Christian confidence in the potential goodness and the redeemability of life was implicit in this formula, and has continually been preserved by it.

When, moreover, the church had for some time pondered further its belief that God is the source of all, three other important implications about creation became clear. 1) The concept of what the act of creation “does” received a radically different meaning in its Christian form. In the dualistic view, creation meant “fashioning” as in human art, uniting form with matter to make something. Although the particular union of the two factors into the object is new, the fundamental elements of form and matter are presupposed. In dualism the most basic constituents of things are already there when the creative act takes place. Creation does not refer to the origination of the existence, being or elements of the process; it merely refers to their union into the things we know, a union which takes place out of more basic elements which are presupposed already to exist.

In the Christian doctrine of creation, however, God is the source of all, and creates out of nothing. Thus the Christian idea, far from merely representing a primitive anthropomorphic projection of human art upon the cosmos, systematically repudiates all direct analogy from human art: God creates, with no material presupposed. Two new meanings, therefore, appear in the idea of creation. (a) The first is that creation concerns \textit{absolute origination}. Nothing is presupposed, no material is there, no process of nature or even of chaos is going on. “Out of nothing” refers to the absolute origination of things whereby the total process appears in existence; it does not refer to an act within an ongoing scheme of things uniting elements of existence already there. (b) Secondly, it follows that if creation concerns absolute origination, then what happened at creation is that finite \textit{existence} or \textit{being} is itself created. Creation does not unite given finite elements; it originates those elements. Therefore creation means primarily to bring process or finitude, in all its aspects, form and matter alike, into being out of nothingness. The movement of creation is not from unformed matter to formed object, but from the nonexistent to the existent. Things are because of creation. Creation refers to the origination of the being or existence of things, and so includes the bringing into being of both the matter and the form with which an object exists. That act of creation, therefore, which characterizes God’s primary and essential relation to all His creatures, is an act that calls forth their existence in all its aspects out of sheer nonexistence. With this idea, we have reached perhaps the most basic and important meaning of the classical formula of \textit{creatio ex nihilo}: creation is the divine evocation into existence, out of nothingness, of finite being in its totality. Thus God as Creator is primarily the source of this total being or existence.

While man cannot make anything out of nothing, but only out of matter already existing, yet God is at this point pre-
eminently superior to men, that He Himself called into being the substance of His creation when previously it had no existence. 9 (Irenaeus)

For God creates, and to create is also ascribed to men; and God has being, and men are said to be, having received from God this gift also. Yet does God create as men do? . . . Perish the thought; we understand the terms in one sense of God and in another of men. For God creates in that He calls what is not into being, needing nothing thereunto; but men work some existing material . . . 7 (Athanasius)

In the next chapter we shall see how important this view of creation as the donation of being is to our conception of God.

2) In the second place, if in the event of creation finitude is brought into being and exists, then the divine act of creation is a totally unique act. The process of creation, however we may try to comprehend it, cannot be exactly like any natural or human process with which we are familiar. For no activity in nature or in human art brings its results into being; it may influence or rearrange what is already there, but it never produces existence itself. When natural change takes place, there must be a “state of things” of some sort from which the change sets out, else it is not understandable at all as change. When man creates, he must have material on which to work. In this sense every new beginning within the world is quite different from the creative event from which the world itself came to be. For in creation nothing is presupposed, except the being, the power, and the will of God; it is a totally unique event.

This means that the ways in which we talk about this event must be different from the way in which we seek to describe natural or human processes. The relation between the Creator and His creation cannot be the same as the relation of one finite event to another; hence we cannot understand the former relation in exactly the terms of the latter relation. Any attempt, therefore, directly and precisely to describe creation in the terms of our experience will inevitably fail in its object. Such a description, set in the terms of finite events, will reduce the unique divine activity of the creation of finitude itself to the level of natural and human actions within finitude. Creation then becomes an event within process rather than the origination of process, and God becomes a finite being in the world, rather than its almighty Creator. The claim to be able literally to describe God’s creative act does not so much reflect piety as it reveals the loss of the religious sense of the transcendent holiness and mystery of God. In thinking or speaking about this event, therefore, we can at best only use analogies. We can say that creation is “like” some process or event in our experience, only if at the same time we assert the deep way in which it is “unlike” that process. Thus because what God is and does transcends the finite experience with which we are familiar, all theological ideas must use symbols or analogies, what we shall later call “myths,” to describe God and His acts.

The uniqueness and transcendence of the divine creative act also explains in further detail why this event can never be an object of scientific inquiry. The purpose of science is to trace and to understand the invariable relations between finite events within the experienced system of the world. It assumes that each event it investigates “comes to be” out of already existing finite events of the same order, and it tries to uncover their significant relations; it also assumes that every event it is concerned with is similar in basic structure to events that can be reproduced and studied here and now. Thus any scientific inquiry presupposes the existence of finite process and conducts its inquiries solely within the scope of that process. Science can therefore inform us about the character and development of the world that God has created, but it cannot and does not seek to study the event by which the whole process came into being. Because they have reference to events on two entirely different levels of being, the inquiries of science and the theological doctrine of creation cannot conflict.

3) Thirdly, this conception that everything there is issues from the being, the power, and the will of God, creates in turn a certain attitude toward the finite world in which we live, which has been enormously significant in our cultural as well as our religious life. For it is from this idea that the unique Christian understanding of “creatureness” derives. Among the wealth of meanings that the word “creature” has for Christian faith, we shall here briefly mention three. In the first place, creaturely existence is for Christian thought intelligible and purposeful in its essential nature because its source and origin lie in the will of God. The massive forces of existence, which seem so thoroughly to dwarf human meanings and so frequently to snuff out human purposes, are not the final power in reality, since they are not its ultimate origin. Man is not a tiny, rational and purposeful mite, floating like flotsam on a vast irrational and blind sea.
Were that so, the intelligibility and meaning of our life would depend entirely upon our own powers of wisdom and goodness. Creaturely existence would then be essentially tragic because that intelligibility and meaning, in the face of impersonal nature without and personal sin within, is a feeble light indeed. For Christians creatureliness is essentially intelligible and purposeful, because its ultimate origin, beyond itself and beyond the nature out of which it came, is the intelligible and loving will and work of God. However mysterious they seem to our finite and sinful gaze, the depths of our existence are neither blind nor cold. And since by faith we can know the nature and purpose of the divine will in which is our ultimate origin, we can have a confidence in the underlying order, goodness, and meaning of our finite lives, that could not be derived from any other assumption.

Combined with this new sense of the underlying purpose and goodness of finite life, there is also a deepened apprehension of the dependence of all creatures on something beyond themselves. Involved in the idea of creation is the clear implication that nothing in all existence, except the Lord who transcends it, is self-sufficient or everlasting. All things great and small, the mountains as well as the flowers that fade, the great nations that seem to endure as well as the most transitory life, the mighty of the earth as well as the weak, all have received their being and existence, not from themselves, but from God. None is the source of itself and its power, nor can any creature preserve itself in existence for another instant without God’s power. Thus the fundamental characteristic of creatureliness is its radical dependence—dependence on all the other finite things that have helped to bring it into being, and ultimately dependence upon God, who gives being and order to the whole finite realm. All creatures are, therefore, inescapably “contingent” and transient. By contingent we mean that the existence of no finite creature is necessary, for its being cannot be derived solely from itself or its own nature; on the contrary, the existence of every creature is dependent entirely on all the external causes and factors that have helped to produce it, and ultimately on God, who brought it into being. It might not have been, because the causes of its being might not have been active. There is, therefore, no inherent logic or necessity for any creature to exist: its being is ultimately precarious and fortuitous, dependent upon many unknown factors beyond its own power to understand and to control—including the will of God. The transience of all creatures follows likewise from their radical dependence. Since its existence depends on factors beyond itself, no creature can be inherently immortal. The external causes that brought it into being can as easily hurl it out again, and they ultimately will. Creatures are “made out of nothing,” and thus their being is always a precarious and temporal victory over the non-being from which they came. Only by the power of God do they receive what being they have, for non-being lurks continually at the horizon of their existence. Only He who is the source of being can transcend the threats of insecurity, of helplessness, and of nonexistence that hover about contingent and transient creaturehood. The result is that for Christian minds, however powerful and enduring one finite being may seem to be, in relation to others, all are as creatures created by God and so are utterly dependent upon Him for their existence, their structure, and their efficacy. All of creation bears inescapably this fundamental mark of “creatureliness.”

It follows from this that in all of creation there is nothing worthy of man’s ultimate worship, for there is nothing that is not finite, partial, and transitory. The doctrine of creation is a great bulwark against idolatry—the worship of a creature, or of one partial aspect of life, in the place of God. However beneficent and creative some power in our life may seem—for example, the power of mind—it is not divine and so cannot be made the exclusive center of life. It, too, has been created by God, and shares the partiality and the possibility for evil that all finite beings share. And however much the great powers of nature and the massive edifices of civilization may dwarf man and seem to him to be divine, to be that on which he ultimately depends and so that which he may legitimately worship, none of them is God, because all are infinitely transcended by that One on whom they in turn depend. Thus the idea of creation draws an ultimate distinction between the transcendent and self-sufficient God and His dependent creation, between the source of existence and what derives from the source. The biblical aversion to idolatry, and the biblical understanding of sin as the claim by a creature to be God, receive their meaning and significance from this primary ontological distinction between the Creator and His creatures.

Finally, as we have noted, since God is the source of all, no aspect of creation can be intrinsically evil. In dualism, because certain aspects of life are seen to be purely evil, they are absolutely rejected and suppressed; it was a dualistic world view that was largely respon-
sible for Western asceticism. And in the life of each of us, it is always the human temptation to view our enemies as “children of the devil,” personifications of evil, combining no facets of good with their manifest bad. Christians have committed both these errors of asceticism and fanaticism, as have others. But in doing so they have forsaken one basic conviction of their faith with regard to the meaning of creaturehood: namely, that each aspect of existence and each being on earth is created by God, and so shares ultimately in the same divine purpose and potentiality of good as do we ourselves. Because God is the source of all there is, while no creature is worthy of unlimited adulation, likewise no creature is deserving of unlimited scorn or hate, because all have received their existence and power from the same loving will.

“CREATURES ARE DEPENDENT YET REAL AND GOOD”

We have seen how the Christian religious conviction that God was sovereign Lord led to the formula creatio ex nihilo, which negated a creation from matter and affirmed in its place that God is the source of all there is. But dualism was not the only metaphysical interpretation of origins which impinged on the Christian community. Another powerful philosophy was monism, or, as it is called in religious thought, pantheism. This is the view which holds that all that is, in so far as it is at all, is identical with God. The pantheist would say with regard to our present subject, “Creatures are made, not out of matter, but are out of God, for creaturely existence is a manifestation of the divine.” This view is in some respects quite similar to the Christian conception we have just described. For Christian thought, too, creatures have their sole source in God and are utterly dependent upon Him for their existence. Like its dualistic counterpart, however, the pantheistic view that creatures are “made out of God” implied certain beliefs that conflicted with basic Christian attitudes, and this, then as now, made it impossible for Christian thinkers to accept monism as an explanation of our ultimate origin. In what ways, then, did the pantheistic understanding of God and of finitude conflict with that of Christian faith?

Whereas pantheism implied that finite existence was illusory and evil, Christians asserted that creaturely existence was in its basic structure real because created by God, and good if it rediscovers itself in God. Secondly, while pantheism implied that “deep down” man was divine because a part of God, Christians know that “deep down” man had rebelled against God and was no “godlet.” Evil for Christians was the real act of a creature who was good and yet free to do evil, not divine and yet capable of a relation with God. For pantheism, evil existed merely in the shadowy world of diversity and matter; man’s real self was God and so, like God, incapable of any sin. Because they knew both the reality and the sin of their own lives, Christians found it impossible to say that creatures were identical with God at any level of their existence. All aspects of their being were creaturely, no aspect was divine. Surprisingly, therefore, the same formula was used to separate Christian understanding from monism as had been used against dualism. Once again Christian thinkers said, “Creatures are made out of nothing.” Only this time they were emphasizing not so much that creatures are not made out of matter as that they are not made out of the substance of God: “non de deo, sed ex nihilo”—not out of God but out of nothing.

But the things established are distinct from him who has established them, and what is made from him who has made them. For he is himself uncreated . . . and lacking nothing . . . but the things which have been made by him have received a beginning . . . [and] must necessarily in all respects have a different term [applied to them] . . . (Irenaeus)

The soul which has shown itself capable of being altered for the worse by its own will, and of being corrupted by sin, and so, of being deprived of the light of eternal truth . . . this soul, I say, is not a part of God, nor of the same nature of God, but is created by Him, and is far different from its Creator. (Augustine)

A reader unfamiliar with religious philosophy will probably be surprised that the pantheistic identification of the finite creature with God should imply, as we have suggested, that finite beings are “illu-

sory,” and that creaturely existence is a realm of evil. Is it not the greatest compliment to finitude to say that “deep down” it is God? Does it not express a confidence in human nature, to affirm that man’s soul is divine? So it might seem at first. And yet, whenever the pantheistic view has appeared in a relatively undiluted form, as in classical India, in Mahayana Buddhism, in Neoplatonism, and in nineteenth-century idealism, it has represented a denial of the reality and value of individual creaturely existence. Since this is one of the
strangest quirks of human thought, it may be well to spell out the logic involved.

As we have noted, pantheism may be defined as the view which affirms that all is God or a part of God; God is the underlying substance and unity of the diverse world of our experience. While pantheism does not, therefore, deny that in some sense there are finite things, and in some sense they have a relative value, the essence of this view is the idea that the reality and value of finite things consist in the degree to which they are identical to or united with God. What is not God, then, is neither real nor good. Now finite things as finite, that is as material, individual, partial, historical, or personal creatures, are clearly in only a very small degree identical with God. For God, as the transcendent source of all, is the negation of all these characteristics of finitude. The divine Being who is above all and in all, clearly can be neither material, individual, personal nor temporal; as the principle of the unity of all things it tends inevitably to absorb, and so to remove, these very characteristics that make things finite and diversified. If finite things are God, and if God transcends their finite characteristics, then inevitably the creature as finite becomes unreal. Only if finite things have an existence, so to speak, “of their own,” separate and distinct from God, can they be said to be real as finite.

It follows that for pantheism “creation,” as the origination of concrete particular individuals within space and time, is a “fall” from the unity and changelessness of the One. And since the One alone is real, this concrete world we experience is in fact merely a shadowy world of unreality, the realm of “Maya,” produced only by our inability to see the real unity behind the diversity. Correspondingly, fulfillment means to move from the level of diversified and particular life as we experience it to a transcendent realm beyond everything individualized and concrete. Thus finite beings begin to find and to realize the reality and goodness of which they are capable, only in so far as they relinquish and lose their creaturiness, their material life, their uniqueness as individuals, and their ties with community and time. The gospel of pantheism is that “deep down” every finite being is the divine. But its problem is that we must go truly “deep down,” beyond all diversity, if we are to find identity with God. And that descent takes us far beyond the bounds of our ordinary experience of things and of persons. For the pantheist, therefore, to remain within the realm of the finite, in its natural, its historical, and its personal forms, is to exist in the midst of diversity and therefore in the realm of illusion and meaninglessness. To study scientifically the interrelations of this realm is merely to systematize error and ignorance; and to expend one’s effort to be creative in this realm is to be vulnerable to unrewarding and unmitigated sorrow. Thus pantheism always leads toward a motif of escape from space-time existence. By identifying God and the world, paradoxically it results in the denial of the reality and value of the world. It is small wonder that neither modern empirical science nor progressive modern society developed in such a cultural atmosphere.

As with dualism, Christians found this view of reality quite antithetical to their own, and so they struggled against it with a goodly vigor. Again their denial of an opposing position—not out of God but out of nothing—involved them in several positive affirmations about the meaning of creation, which have had tremendous significance for Christian faith, and for our Western cultural life. First, all Christian theologians asserted that creatures were not illusory shadows whose real substance or reality was God. Rather each creature was a real existent, not identical with God but separate from Him, an existing thing with an intrinsic being, an essential structure, and certain natural powers. Within their fundamental creaturly limits all finite things were independent, real, and effective substances, able to act among other finite beings, and so able to be a secondary cause of events in space and time. Despite their dependence, contingency, and temporality, creatures possessed a given structure of self-activity which determined their reactions and actions amid other finite entities. In man this inherent structure of activity is represented by freedom and intelligence, which enable men to be relatively independent, spontaneous centers of activity within God’s world.

Two significant aspects of Christian experience underscored in Christian thought this fundamental biblical distinction between God’s being and man’s being. The reality of God as a significant act against God continually reminded Christian thought that men were not divine and yet were real centers of effective action; and the reality of divine grace brought home to them that the creature was a real object of the divine concern. For Christians, therefore, man was an “image,” not a shadow of God, and this meant that he existed and could be creative in a creatively way, as God existed and was creative in a divine way. As Thomas reasoned, creation is a divine act whereby creatures are given “being.” Thus while creatures do not have an es-
sential or an eternal, a “divine,” being, nevertheless they really possess being in all its aspects and with many of its powers. For all Christians, therefore, individual existing things were by no means the result of a “fall” from God. On the contrary, God had purposely established separate existents by His creative act, creatures who stood “over against” Himself, as dependent yet real centers of being and power.

Furthermore, it was fundamental to the Christian hope that in becoming related to God, man does not slough off his creaturehood. Rather he becomes, as Paul says, a “new creature”—or, in that phrase which would have horrified a pantheist, he becomes “reborn.” Thus individual concrete existence is not an evil thing that is to be progressively lost in religion; it is an essentially and potentially good thing that can be recreated. Creatures are, in Christian eyes, entities capable, under God, of experiencing and embodying value, for despite their contingency and temporality, each creature has the possibility of the genuine fulfillment of its nature. For man this essential structure consists, as we noted, of personal freedom and intelligence, which make possible and even require his communion with others in responsible love. Correspondingly, man’s “good” is not something that negates or transcends his creaturely humanness, but is the fulfillment, the restoration, of that very structure of freedom, intelligence, and love. Biblical faith affirms not only the reality and the creativity of the creature, but its value as well, even though it continually denies that this reality is self-caused, or that this value could be achieved in independence of God.

This Christian conception of creation as the establishment of a real world of potential, even if as yet unrealized goodness, has had a tremendous influence on our Western cultural life. Modern Western man has a down-to-earth sense that in dealing with material nature, with individual persons, and with the events and stuff of historical life—in producing food, comfort, security, in fostering the personal relations of the home, and in creating and improving his society—he is dealing with the most immediate reality he is able to experience in this life. He also has had, at least until recently, a buoyant confidence that these efforts are not illusory or vain, that man really can find satisfaction and value through achieving more security and establishing deeper human community. On the whole, however tragic his immediate situation may be, it seldom seriously occurs to modern Western man to wish to escape the world of matter and of history, as a realm of illusion or a realm of ineradicable evil, as, for example, an Indian ascetic might. If anything, he would seek to find other means to improve his lot here in space and time.

This belief that creation and therefore finite being is “good” is one of our most fundamental assumptions about life. We are apt to think that it is the natural point of view of mankind, because it is so deeply imbedded in the cultural heritage which has made us what we are. Consequently we often overlook the inheritance of ideas and convictions that form its basis, and we even assert that our Western confidence in the goodness of life can persist without its own historical foundation in the idea of creation. Now it is true that this confidence in the order and goodness of life has been furthered by the success which science has achieved in understanding and controlling the created world. However, this confidence is not so much the result of science as it is the long-term basis of science. Only because men were already convinced that they were surrounded by a world of real and orderly relations would they ever have embarked on the arduous enterprise of understanding that world. And only because they believed that a relative meaning and value could be found in natural and historical life would they have sought to control nature for human purposes, and to refashion community for the sake of human fulfillment. The optimism and buoyancy of Western culture is more an effect of the idea of the good creation than its cause.

To sum up this section; the formula creatio ex nihilo not only denies the dualistic “out of existing matter” when it describes creation. Just as much, it denies the pantheistic “out of God” as the origin of the reality of things. God is the sole source of finite existence: things are not made out of something other than and equal to God. But, equally, God is not the substance or reality of finite things; they are not made out of the divine nature but out of nothing. For the Christian, therefore, the world is neither divine nor illusory; and men are neither intrinsically evil nor are they “godlets.” Their contingency and transience do not make them worthless, nor do their reality and potential value make them deity. Rather they are “creatures of God,” made solely by His power and will, but made out of nothing. This concept of the “creature” who is of value and yet not divine is the firmest basis for an understanding of life that avoids both nihilism and idolatry.
c. Maker of Heaven and Earth

"God Creates in Freedom and with Purpose"

In the two preceding sections we have seen that the Christian idea of creation assumes two corollaries: (1) God is the sole transcendent, unconditioned ground or source of all existence; and (2) creatures are dependent and yet real and good. In the one case we have apparently affirmed a strictly monistic account of origins, as opposed to any sort of dualism; and yet in the second we have seemed to assert a dualism of Creator and creature that denies any ultimate identity between the two. Perhaps now we can understand better why there are inevitable tensions between speculative philosophy and the Christian view of creation. For surely this monistic-dualistic view of reality, this description of an Absolute alongside of which, like a little chick, huddles a dependent yet real finitude, is the most paradoxical "philosophy" that can be imagined. And yet as we have gone along we have seen a wealth of meaning for human existence which only these paradoxes seem capable of generating.

We have come, therefore, to the most difficult and thorny question of all: what is the relation between this self-sufficient "Absolute" and this dependent yet real creation? How have Christians thought of the process of creation, and so of the basic relation between the transcendent Creator and His creatures? What do we mean when we say "God created the world"? In exploring this question, let us remember the principle we suggested earlier in this chapter: that all language about God and His relation to the world must be in terms of analogy. Since an event like creation is quite out of the ordinary, the only way we can describe it is to say it is "like" some event in our more usual experience, while keeping in mind that it is also "unlike" all the events we know. Thus, because it is inescapably analogical in character, theological language points to a meaning that transcends any clear and precise description.

As might be expected, there were in the culture that surrounded Christianity several analogies of long standing that sought to describe "how" the process of creation took place. For example, stemming from some of the oldest pagan myths and revived in Gnostic cosmologies, there was the analogy of generation: the world had been produced by the process of mating and of birth familiar in our experience of animal and human family life. Another analogy we have already mentioned described creation in the terms of human art or craft; the world was made by God out of matter, as a carpenter makes a box out of wood. Perhaps the most sophisticated analogy, used by the later Platonic tradition, was that of emanation or of overflow: as rays of light emanate from the sun, and as water overflows from an inexhaustible fountain, so the world emanates or flows from its source in God. The one thing these various analogies had in common was that each sought to describe the process, the "how" of creation, by likening it to some process familiar in human experience.

Now although some Christian thinkers found themselves using these analogies to explain creation, nevertheless on the whole Christian thought felt them to be inadequate and inaccurate descriptions of what Christians believed about God's creative relation to the world. Our previous discussion has indicated some of these reasons. For example, the carpenter analogy, if understood too literally, certainly implied a dualism which the fundamental concept of ex nihilo denied. Likewise the analogy of generation, and its more sophisticated counterpart of emanation, implied the pantheistic conception that the world is an aspect of the substance of God. But, most important, Christian theologians realized that these attempts to describe the process of creation in terms of how it took place were beyond their capacity, possibly dangerous to their most fundamental convictions, and lastly irrelevant for their purpose. The basic formula "out of nothing" is in fact an explicit abandonment of any "how" explanation. For it denies the one sort of creative process with which we are familiar, creation out of something. By this paradoxical formula Christian thought has expressed its conviction that with regard to "how," the divine creation lies beyond our understanding. Thus while some analogies telling us how creation occurred do appear in Christian thought, they always remain outside the main theological purpose of the thinker, and, if pressed too eagerly, threaten the uniquely Christian character of his thought. Our question is, then, why is it that these analogies concerning the "how" of creation were on the whole rejected by theology?

The first reason is that it seems to be quite impossible for us to understand the "how" of a process that so completely transcends our experience as does creation. We can understand how a process occurs that is within our experience, or is really similar to other processes we have experienced. But a process quite beyond the bounds of our experience, as this one is, seems, as Kant and the empiricists have insisted, not to be a possible object of our knowledge. We cannot experience the event of absolute origination, as we might watch an
changes in the concept of cause from its ordinary use. In that case, however, it ceases to be a concept that can "explain" anything to us, and merely becomes a word expressive of a relation we know in other more appropriate terms. And if we do not so transform this analogy to fit this unique relation, the idea of cause destroys the conception it is seeking to clarify.

Finally, Christian thought realized that "how" explanations were antithetical to its own religious understanding of God and His relation to the world. To clarify this point, we must analyze in some detail the character of "how" explanations, and then look at an entirely different sort of explanation. Explanations in terms of "how" an event occurs are most appropriate to the study of natural processes, and for such study, as in the physical sciences, they are extremely informative. Here understanding consists of tracing the event through its various structural developments, in seeing how the action moves from one stage to another, and in finding the significant forces and principles at work in such action. In such an explanation, what we look for are the variable and, if possible, the necessary relations between the stages of the event, relations which we can express in terms of some universal principle. The reason is that the explanation becomes more rational to our minds in precisely the degree to which we can show that the process proceeds automatically and invariably, because of the universal principles which the event illustrates. When we can say that every stage of the event is necessitated by a universal principle acting through the significant "causes" of the event, then we feel that we have explained it. For example, how do we explain an eclipse of the sun in these terms? We can explain the eclipse when we can show how all the forces at work on sun, moon, and earth necessarily determine the development of their relative positions according to the universal laws of gravity and motion. In "how" explanations we understand an occurrence when we have uncovered the necessary "causes," i.e., the variable relations that make the event happen according to universal principles. This is the method and goal of science with regard to the natural world, and of that sort of speculative philosophy which seeks to understand the structure of the universe by means of a group of interrelated universal principles.

Now this kind of explanation in terms of "how" undoubtedly is the kind of understanding that most directly satisfies the mind seeking purely intellectual solutions to its problems. But it raises several serious issues as a way of understanding some of the mysteries of life,
especially when it seeks to provide answers to our deepest questions. Aside from the objection to speculation about ultimate processes which we have already raised, inevitably such understanding sheds no light on the question of why we are here, of what mighty purposes there are to give direction and meaning to our frail existence, or what our destiny is to be. An understanding of structure finally gives us no help in the search for meaning. For let us notice that in so far as it achieves complete success, a “how” explanation eradicates freedom and purpose from the event if it seeks to comprehend. To the scientific inquirer, freedom can only represent an irrational element, because it is not totally explained by the necessary and invariable structure of relations that science seeks. Correspondingly, purpose and meaning cannot be a part of a “scientific” explanation; inevitably they involve freedom, and freedom, which is moved by intentions, is by its nature not a necessitated, impersonal, and invariable reality. Thus if our understanding of the ultimate character of our universe is completely a “how” understanding, directed by and copied on the understanding that science provides of natural events, it cannot find room for either freedom or purpose in existence. The ultimate origins of things then becomes an impersonal process with neither intention nor goal, and our own human existence becomes merely a part of that larger determined process. A “how” explanation, if made the final type of explanation, ultimately drains finitude of its meaning and promise.

There is, however, another type of explanation. In the case of human and historical events, we are not concerned solely with the structure of the development of the event, but rather we include as well an explanation in terms of the intentions or motive, the “meaning” of the action. It is true, of course, that events in human life and in history contain structural elements that make relatively invariable much of our individual and social behavior. Human actions respond to and are conditioned by developments in nature, in society, and in our own bodily and psychic mechanisms, which can be analyzed in terms of their impersonal structures. But human actions also spring from “meanings and purposes” which cannot be so analyzed; they combine with these structural elements the mystery of freedom and of decision. In this complex situation two facts stand out. First of all, we feel we have understood a human action and all its consequences only when we have understood its why, its purpose. We find the actions of others intelligible only when we know what was “in their mind” when they did what they did. Without a “why,” human acts are blind and meaningless, the automatic actions of things and not of men. Secondly, we find that we must transcend and even relinquish an explanation of “how” it happened if we are to understand “why” it happened. For, as we have noted, an all-sufficient structural understanding ultimately denies reality to the freedom, and so the new meanings and purposes, of our acts. A dimension of mystery must be left beyond our structural understanding if freedom is to be a real factor in our view of human life.

As an illustration of this interweaving of kinds of explanation, let us take the example of an important decision in the career of a young medical scientist: A young doctor decides to leave a lucrative practice in the city to go to a small and poor community. Now what is the most relevant kind of explanation if we wish to understand this action? There is the development of chemical action in the young man’s brain and nervous system as he makes the decision. An understanding of this structure is one sort of explanation but probably not very helpful in this case. There is also the whole complex of physical, psychological, and social forces that have played upon his character and person: here are other levels of explanation still in terms of structure. But the important point is that no one would be able to find any satisfying explanation of this surprising act in terms of these “causes.” The first question every one of his friends, even his behavioristic colleagues from medical school, would ask is: “Why has he done this? Was he in trouble in the city, had his practice fallen off, or did he have some idealistic urge to be of service to a poorer community?” The odds are heavy that his friends would call him in to explain his motive in forsaking a good life, fame, advancement, and possible achievements in research, in order to practice in the country. They would regard the act as unwarranted and foolish, that is, mysterious and unexplained, until he gave them a good “reason” for it. And only if they did not regard his “motive” as a valid one, would they look for a structural explanation. If he said he was in trouble in the city, they would leave it at that; if he said he wanted to serve humanity, his more cynical friends would probably begin to talk about his neuroses. In any case, they would regard the act as reasonable, that is “explained,” if his reason or motive satisfied them. All of this merely shows that every man, whatever his philosophy of man’s behavior, assumes that he and his friends are free, that this freedom is directed by intentions and purposes, and so if we are to explain to
ourselves what other people do, we must know their intentions. Let us note further that if anyone did think that the structural changes involved in the doctor’s decision fully explained his action, then he must conclude that the act had, in fact, no effective purpose and so no humanly intelligible meaning. If the doctor did it only because of his psychic or cellular structure, he would be declared in court by other physicians to be legally irresponsible. Since such an act is not the product of freedom and intention it has no human meaning, and so it is in effect the act of a determined object that is to be evaluated in that light alone. Like the falling of a leaf, an act without purpose is “merely caused,” the determined effect of a preceding physical event, and nothing more with regard to value, meaning, or responsibility could be said of it. Only where freedom and so the power of decision are assumed, only where a purpose is evident, does an action become meaningful to itself or to others as a human action. If, then, we are to understand human behavior, we must finally explain men’s acts in terms of freedom and of purposes and not simply in terms of their structural antecedents.

Explanations in terms of structure, and those in terms of free purpose and intention, do not necessarily conflict with one another, although if either tries to exclude the other completely, conflict will occur. Both are essential in understanding the mystery of human and historical action. For the complexity of human existence is such that it contains both structural and intentional elements; it is made up both of determined processes and freedom and thus it requires these very different kinds of explanation. Christian thought must accept the scientific method, which searches for the necessary interrelations between events, as a valid and important means for understanding the observable world around us. But Christianity can never accept science as a total view of finite reality, especially historical reality. For our historical experience reveals all too clearly that freedom, both human and divine, is interlaced with causal necessity in everything that happens. Since, then, the determined relations relevant to scientific inquiry give us only a partial picture of the mystery of our historical existence, there we are justified in using the categories of freedom, intention, and purpose as complementary means of explanation. For only if at some point the impersonal process and so the structural sequence is transcended in freedom, and only if our explanations go beyond the “how” and include the “why,” can there be meaning in human or in divine life.

Finally, to return to our example, we have seen that if we are to understand the doctor’s action we must know his purpose. Now to know the purposes and intentions of a person we must receive a personal word of explanation from him, a revelation of his will and the intent that motivated it. Purposes cannot always be seen from the outside; often they must be revealed from within, for the will and intent of a man are not always evident on the surface of his acts. Consider all the possible explanations for the doctor’s leaving the city, and the impossibility of knowing the real “why” unless he himself revealed his own intentions to his friends. In dealing with persons, therefore, we can find meaning in the whole series of events their actions may initiate only when we have received this sort of revelation of intention and purpose from the depths of their personal being. Explanations of human actions and so of events in history must include, therefore, not only an analysis of the structural interrelations of the conditions and elements of the event, but even more, “revelations” of the inner and so hidden purposes and intentions that motivate the freedom of the actors in these events. Now this understanding of human behavior and of historical events is just the sort of understanding that Christians have felt that they possessed about the ultimate origins of their existence. They know that they can never comprehend the mystery from which they came by understanding how the world came to be. But as in the case of free human activity, they have not felt that this lack is absolutely irreparable. For the mystery of our ultimate origins has been dispelled by a revelation of the purpose for which we were brought into being. In Christian faith the claim is made to know the nature of the will of God who created the world and to know why He did so. In its communion with God in Christ, the Christian community has encountered the Almighty Power from which all of finitude has come, and it has found that the final nature of that creative will is love. Thus each Christian knows that the transcendent mystery which impinges on his life and directs it is not dark meaninglessness, but a creative purpose seeking for the fulfillment of his own small life and that of the history of which he is a part. There is for him, therefore, an answer to his question “why am I here?” The answer is that he is “here” through the free creative activity of a loving will that brought the world into being only because it was “good.” The Christian understanding of creation as an act of a free and loving divine will is the sole basis for our confidence that our finite life has a meaning.
a purpose, and a destiny which no immediate misfortune can eradicate.

Christian thought has seldom, therefore, claimed that it knew just how God had created the world, and it has never sought to under-stand creation in terms of that sort of explanation. The idea of crea-
tion has not been primarily a metaphysical concept, communicating
to us a privileged insight into the cosmic process, far beyond expe-
rience, by which things came to be from God. On the contrary,
Christian thought about creation has emphasized the other sort of
explanation of our world, an explanation of the creative act in terms
of freedom and of purpose. For, as we have just seen, the knowledge
that Christian faith has of God is primarily a knowledge of His loving
will, of the intention of that will to restore and redeem His creation.
In this knowledge the Christian knows that God deals with men
purposefully, and that His purpose is love. Therefore through this
revelation Christians know that God created the world, as He has
redeemed it, in divine freedom and with a divine purpose. The idea
of creation is founded on the religious knowledge through faith of
the character of God’s will; it is a certainty based on the immediate
experience of God’s sovereignty and His love in the covenant with
Israel and in Christ, and the consequent faith that existence, which
is known there to come from God, is created in the same love.

For this reason, when theologians have spoken of the act of creation,
they have used the analogy of human historical action. They have
emphasized that this act was a free and intended act on the part
of God, and that the purpose of this act was that “it was good.” Realizing
that any intimation of necessity in the act of creation would eliminate
these basic religious elements from their concept, they have tended
to insist that this free purpose to create “because it was good” was the
only explanation that can be given. In effect, therefore, Christian
thought has said: “However it was accomplished, creation was an act
of divine freedom, done solely because of God’s goodness and love,
that He might bring forth a good creation.”

But He Himself in Himself after a fashion which we cannot
describe or conceive . . . formed them as He pleased. 15 (Irenaeus)

And by the words, “God saw that it was good,” it is sufficiently
intimated that God made what was made not from any necessity,
nor for the sake of supplying any want, but solely from its own
goodness, i.e. because it was good. 16 (Augustine)

God cannot be conceived without His eternity, power, wisdom,
goodness, truth, right, and mercy . . . His goodness because there
was no other cause why He should make all things, neither can
He be moved by any other reason to conserve them, than for
His only goodness. 17 (Calvin)

In each of these quotations, and throughout Christian thought on
creation, we find this same theme: Creation is an act of divine free-
dom, done solely because of the divine purpose of love. This is the
most fundamental knowledge that Christians have of God and of the
character of His actions, and it is also the most important affirmation
they could make about the ultimate origin of their own existence.
To know the process by which things came to be would be only
interesting; to know that it comes from a will which unites its power
with a creative love is to be able to answer with confidence all our
most crucial questions about the meaning and intelligibility of our
existence.

In Chapter 2 we said that the idea of creation was a “religious”
rather than a scientific or metaphysical idea, because it provided an
answer to one of the fundamental religious questions of man’s life,
namely, the question of the ultimate meaning of his life as a con-
tingent, temporal being set in the wider context of nature and of
history. And we said that consequently this idea was “about” the
transcendent glory and majesty of God the Creator, and the finite
but potentially good character of our human existence. Now in this
chapter we have explored the content of this idea more fully. We have
seen that within it are three central concepts: that God is the trans-
cendent source of all existence; that creaturely existence is dependent,
contingent, and transient, and yet possesses a reality and a value in
its own fulfillment; and finally, that the divine act of creation is to be
understood not in terms of structure but in terms of its divine purpose,
as a free act of a loving will. And we attempted to show how each of
these concepts points at one and the same time to the sovereign
power of God over all existence, and to the meaningful character of
our human life. But as our final discussion makes very plain, this con-
junction of divine sovereign power and human meaning is possible
in the Christian faith only because through Jesus Christ the almighty
divine will reveals itself as a loving will seeking human fulfillment.
And so in another sense this doctrine turns out to be “religious” in
character. For the kind of understanding it expresses is not gained through an intellectual inquiry into the ultimate structure of things, but is achieved through knowledge of the will and purposes of God as known in religious faith.

On the other hand, our discussion of the content of this idea has made clear that this “religious” doctrine about God and the world spills over into philosophy and metaphysics at every turn. We found it becoming progressively defined through its denial of the philosophical alternatives of dualism and pantheism, and we have found it disputing with philosophy concerning the principles that should direct our ultimate understanding of things. In the next chapter we shall discuss the view of God that is implied in this primary statement about Him that Christians affirm: Maker of heaven and earth. And there we shall be even more concerned with this intimate relation of metaphysical and religious ideas that make up our subject.

NOTES

1. (p. 46) Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book II, Chapter 1, Section 1. (About A.D. 170.)
2. (p. 47) Calvin, J., Institutes, Book I, Chapter XIV, Section 10.
3. (p. 50) The one exception is Justin Martyr, who said that God created the world “out of unformed matter,” and rather pompously proclaimed that Plato had lifted this idea from the Jewish Scriptures. Justin Martyr, First Apology, Sections 10, 59, 60.
4. (p. 50) In his argument with Hermogenes, Tertullian points out that since an independent material principle is eternal and therefore divine, it must, in a metaphysical dualism, be equal to God himself. Hence Christians, who recognize only a single God, cannot countenance a dualistic ontology, for “He would not be Lord of a substance which was coequal with himself.” Tertullian, The Treatise against Hermogenes, Chapters 4 and 6.
5. (p. 53) Tertullian, op. cit., Chapter 17. See also Irenaeus, op. cit., Book II, Chapter 10, Sections 2 and 3; and Origen, De Principiis, Book II, Chapter 1, Section 4.
6. (p. 54) Irenaeus, op. cit., Book II, Chapter 10, Section 4. Probably the clearest and strongest statements of the relation of the act of creation to the being or existence of things comes in Thomism: “Now among all effects the most universal is being itself; and hence it must be the proper effect of the first and most universal cause, God. . . . Now to produce being absolutely, and not merely as this or that being, belongs to the nature of creation. Hence it is manifest that creation is the proper act of God alone.” Thomas, Summa Theologica, Part I, Question 45, Article 9. “To create is, properly speaking, to cause or produce the being of things . . . . To create, therefore, belongs to God according to His being.” Thomas, op. cit., Question 45, Article 6.
7. (p. 54) Athanasius, De Deo, Book II, Chapter 3, Section 11.
8. (p. 58) For example, this classic text from the Hindu Scriptures illustrates the pantheistic identification of our own reality with that of the All or the Whole:
   “That which is the finest essence—this whole world has that as its soul. That is Reality. That is Atman (Soul). That art thou, Svayamkrt.” Chandogya Upanishad, 6th Pāparātā, 6th Khandā. Hume, R. E., The Thirteen Principal Upanishads, Oxford University Press, 1949, p. 246.
10. (p. 59) Irenaeus, op. cit., Book III, Chapter 8, Section 3.
11. (p. 59) Augustine, The City of God, Book XI, Chapter 23.

Thus because Christian thought held that there was an absolute distinction of vital religious importance between deity and creatures, the analogy of generation (“begotten”), which implied identity of substance, was henceforth applied only to the origin of the Son from the Father, and the concept of “creation out of nothing” was applied only to creatures. The analogies were kept radically separated to emphasize the absolute gulf between God and creation: “If the son, therefore not creature; if creature, not son; for great is the difference between them, and son and creature cannot be the same.” Athanasius, De Deo, Book III, Chapter 15, Section 3.

Nothing could indicate more clearly the perversion of Christian faith to pantheism than this argument over the deity or the creaturehood of the Son of God.
(p. 61) "For creation means that free and individual beings are brought forth, or from the point of view of the Creator, it signifies that he has infused his own being into another thing which thereby has taken an independent existence of its own and may later on itself become productive. Thus the idea of creation, although transcending human experience, serves to explain the world as it really is in its two-fold character of individual autonomy and universal dependence." Frank, Erich, *Philosophical Understanding and Religious Truth*, Oxford University Press, 1945, p. 62.

(p. 65) Augustine, Thomas, and Luther are examples: Augustine uses the Platonic analogy of participation in the Ideas, Thomas that of cause and effect, Luther the familiar analogy of speech.

(p. 74) The philosopher of historical knowledge, Collingwood, makes this point repeatedly: "... because it is peculiar to history that the historian re-enacts in his own mind the thoughts and motives of the agents whose actions he is narrating, and no succession of events is an historical succession unless it consists of acts whose motives can, in principle at least, be thus reenacted."

"His work may begin by discovering the outside of an event, but it can never end there; he must always remember that the event was an action, and that his main task is to think himself into this action, to discern the thought of its agent."

"For history, the object to be discovered is not the mere event, but the thought expressed in it. To discover that thought is already to understand it. After the historian has ascertained the facts, there is no further process of inquiry into their causes. When he knows what happened, he already knows why it happened."

"The cause of the event, for him, means the thought in the mind of the person by whose agency the event came about: and this is not something other than the event, it is the inside of the event itself. All history is the history of thought."

Collingwood, R. G., *The Idea of History*, Oxford University Press, 1946, pp. 115, 213, 214, 215. In this sense, as we shall see further in Chapter 10, the Christian understanding of creation can be said to be an understanding of the presuppositions of history, thought about in the terms in which we seek to understand historical action.

(p. 72) Irenaeus, op. cit., Book II, Chapter 2, Section 4.
