

## THE EVOLUTION OF THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE ABOUT THE CREATION EX NIHILO IN THE WORKS OF GREEK APOLOGISTS

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of our examination into this topic is twofold: 1) to examine the approaches of the theme of creation in the Christian apologetic writings of the second century; 2) to analyze their philosophical support, the concepts substantiating the expression of this theory on the origin of the universe. In methodological terms, we would like to focus on the cosmological ideas of four patristic personalities: Justin the Martyr, Athenagoras of Athens, Tatian the Syrian, and Theophilus of Antioch. An attentive examination highlights a progress in the Christian thinking regarding the origin of the world, which occurred during a relatively brief period of time. We can notice, during a first stage, a cohabitation of the apologists with the Greek philosophical tradition, and, afterward, a gradual, yet decisive, breakup with the Hellenic vision regarding the way of understanding the relation between God and creation.*

**Keywords:** *Creation; time; Middle Platonism; apology; Christianity;*

### INTRODUCTION

The concept *ex nihilo*, although only implied in the Hebrew *Scriptures*<sup>1</sup> (Psalms 33:6; Isaiah 44:24; Wisdom 1:14; 2 Maccabees 7:28),<sup>2</sup> developed a quasi-independent history in the Christian environments outside Palestine. The concept was invoked here by the Christian apologists who initially used it on the background of the doctrinal debates with the pagan and the Christian (heretic) philosophical schools of Rome,<sup>3</sup> and of other important cities of the Roman Empire during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. Its usefulness was proved in the fact that it helped delineate a conclusive answer to at least two cosmological positions competing with that of Christianity: the traditional, namely the Greek-Roman one, which by the syntagm *ex nihilo nihil fit*<sup>4</sup> affirmed the co-eternity of matter with the Divine; and that of later date,

<sup>1</sup> Ian Alexander McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation*, Presbyterian Publishing Corp, 2014, xiii.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed vision of Judaism regarding the *ex nihilo* doctrine, see Seymour Feldman, “In the Beginning God Created the Heavens and the earth’: A Neo-Platonic Midrash,” in *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis: Don Isaac Abravanel: Defender of the Faith*, Routledge Curzon, London and New York, 2003, pp. 176-183; “The Problem of the Creation of the World in Hellenistic Judaism and Early Christianity before the Gnostic Crisis in the Second Century,” in Gerhard May, *Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of “Creation out of Nothing” in Early Christian Thought*, trans. A.S. Worrall, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1994, pp. 1-38 and Norbert M. Samelson, *Judaism and the Doctrine of Creation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> Gerhard May, *Creatio ex Nihilo...*, pp. 150-151.

<sup>4</sup> For an incursion into the history of this axiom of the philosophy of Antiquity, see Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe: Wherein All the Reason and Philosophy of Atheism is Confuted, and Its*



Marcionite and Gnostic, supporting a subordinatianist vision of the Creator Logos in quality of mediator between the Divinity and creation. Drafted in order to support the cause of the Christians who were unjustly and illegally persecuted, the Christian writers' apologies served, therefore, as a way to enlighten the public opinion concerning the Christian faith and teaching, especially the educated layers of society. These writings also provided for posterity the first attempts of expressing the revealed teaching in the conceptual language of the world of the Antiquity.

Before discussing the meaning of "creation" as used in the modern Christian theological context, having the connotation that the Universe came into existence "out of nothing" by a free act of God,<sup>5</sup> the Christian cosmology had a more sinewy trajectory to cover, not so much out of an absence of this conviction from the original Christian mental state, but, especially out of the absence of the necessity to make this firm statement until then.

It must be mentioned, at the same time, that the apologists' speculation regarding the origin of the world occasionally followed their attempts to reject the accusations of atheism directed against the Christians, being occasioned by the criticism they were pointing, in their turn, at Greek-Roman mythology and philosophy. If in the beginning, the image of a God modelling matter appeared as a bridge between the two cultures and religions, and was used by the apologists irenically, their subsequent answers are marked by a strict delimitation between the eternal divine nature and the contingent world brought into existence in time, in an obviously polemical approach. At the same time, while initially the ontological distinction between God and creation, in this literal sense, was expressed in more figurative terms, being slightly attenuated, it gradually focused on the explicit articulation of the *ex nihilo* doctrine, which we inherited to this day.<sup>6</sup>

We find, therefore, with the patristic writers we are dealing with, a clear-cut ontological distinction between God and matter or, more precisely, between God and all the changing, corruptible reality. For each of them, God is the uncreated, the unbegotten (similar in attributes with the Divinity of the Platonic philosophers), but, at the same time, also the direct causal Principle for everything that exists. In this respect, they are all deeply

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*Impossibility Demonstrated*, vol. 1, Oxford, D.A., Talboys, 1829, pp. 125-136. This syntagm is specific of the philosophers of Antiquity, both theists (Parmenides, Melissos, Zenon, Xenophanes, Anaxagoras and Empedocles), and atomists (Democrit, Epicurus, Lucretius), the latter group reaching the conclusion that a world that could not come from nothing exists since eternity, as it would not make sense for it to come into existence at a certain moment, given that it comes from the same elements (different from nothing). The major difference between the Christian vision and that of Antiquity, as it will be highlighted, consists in the fact that the God of the *Scripture* (especially of the *New Testament*, if we think of John 1:3) cohabitates with the creation, being involved in its coming into existence (even since its most undetermined state – matter) without suffering any diminution of His transcendence and impassivity and continuing to remain its cause and its target in quality of its Creator, Almighty, Savior and Perfector.

<sup>5</sup> Sfântul Iustin Martirul și Filosoful, *Dialog cu iudeul Trifon*, in col. "Părinți și Scriitori Bisericești" ("P.S.B."), vol. 2, *Apologeți de limbă greacă*, translation and notes by Olimp N. Căciulă, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române (E.I.B.M.B.O.R.), București, 1980, pp. 98-99; Atenagora Atenianul, *Solie în favoarea creștinilor*, IV, in "P.S.B.", vol. 2, pp. 376-377; Teofil al Antiohiei, *Trei Cărți către Autolic*, Cartea I, IV, in "P.S.B.", vol. 2, p. 284.

<sup>6</sup> As the medieval Jewish thinker Moses Maimonides showed, this teaching is the only one in common among Judaism, Christianity, and Mohammedanism. See Janet M. Soskice, "Creatio ex Nihilo: Its Jewish and Christian foundations," in *Creation and the Gold of Abraham*, ed. David B. Burrell et al., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, p. 24.



monotheistic, rejecting any possibility of existence of a second, or of several gods,<sup>7</sup> yet without excluding God's tripersonal quality.

## 1. THE CREATION OUT OF UNSHAPED MATTER – A CHRISTIAN ATTEMPT AT COHABITATION WITH THE MIDDLE PLATONIST VISION

Justin the Martyr and Athenagoras the Athenian, although Christians (the first up to martyrdom), present a certain hesitation in their writings concerning this radical vision regarding the origin of the world. It is, as we will see, a hesitation that is due, on the one hand, to the environment they were formed in (without a very intimate contact with the Jewish thinking), and, on the other hand, to their attempt at providing the pagan world with a familiar cosmological vision, with Christian emphasis. The fact that they had left behind the traditional Greek-Roman mentality, after their conversion to Christianity, results from the fact that they put the accent on God's sovereignty in contrast with the radical contingency of the Universe. However, as they endeavor to keep a dialogue with their non-Christian interlocutors, both of these writers in their cosmology rely, to a certain extent, on the Hellenist notion of the creation out of unshaped matter.

Justin provides the most evident affirmation along this line of thought in his comment regarding the meanings of *Genesis*, in his first *Apology*: "And we were taught that, being good, God created, in the beginning, from the unshaped matter, everything, for man..."<sup>8</sup> This affirmation is completed by his famous assertion from *Apologies* that "Plato plagiarized from Moses' writings" when he affirmed that God changed the unshaped matter and created the world.<sup>9</sup> Justin replied that, based on this teaching, Plato and his disciples (but also the Christians) learnt that God by His Spirit created the entire world from the substratum, as Moses had previously demonstrated.<sup>10</sup>

Athenagoras presents a similar viewpoint regarding the beginning and the constitution of the creation in several contexts. The most striking expression is found in the tenth chapter of his *Embassy for the Christians*, in a discussion on the divine creation by means of the Spirit. "El [Logosul] emerged," Athenagoras claims, "to serve as the Ideal Form and energy-giving Power for everything that is of material nature and which lies at the basis of things as an entity without qualities."<sup>11</sup> This imagery operates in *Embassy...* (Chap. 15) where Athenagoras underlines the accessory relation between matter and God by means of an analogy with clear Platonic connotations: God and matter are connected like the artisan and his materials. In this context, matter is in relation to God like the effect is with its cause, subordinated to him to exert his craft.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, matter, which is open to all the modifications, depends on the Demiurge-God to acquire structure, form, and order.

The preceding affirmations must be considered in light of what we encounter of these patristic authors in other writings. Justin the Martyr, in *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*

<sup>7</sup> Iustin Martirul, *Dialog...*, XI, in "P.S.B.", vol. 2, pp. 102-104; Atenagora Atenianul, *Solie...*, IV, in "P.S.B.", vol. 2, pp 376-377; Teofil al Antiohiei, *Trei Cărți...*, I, 7 and II, 4, in "P.S.B.", vol. 2, pp. 286, 295.

<sup>8</sup> Iustin Martirul, *Apologia întâia în favoarea creștinilor*, I, 10, in "P.S.B.", vol. 2, p.31.

<sup>9</sup> Iustin Martirul, *Apologia întâia în favoarea creștinilor*, I, 59, in "P.S.B.", vol. 2, pp. 64-65.

<sup>10</sup> Iustin Martirul, *Apologia întâia în favoarea creștinilor*, I, 67, in "P.S.B.", vol. 2, p. 71.

<sup>11</sup> Athénagore, *Supplique au sujet des chrétiens*, X, in col. "Sources Chrétiennes" ("S.C."), vol. 3, introduction et traduction de Gustave Bardy, Édition du Cerf, Paris, 1943, p. 92. See, in the introduction to the same volume, the detailed presentation of the doctrine of creation and of the emergence of time in the vision of the Athenian apologist (pp. 1-69).

<sup>12</sup> Athénagore, *Supplique au sujet des chrétiens*, XV, in col. "S.C.", vol. 3, pp. 103-104.



affirms that “the world was made” and that “only God is immortal and uncorruptible and this is precisely why He is God, while all the others, which come after Him, are born and corruptible.”<sup>13</sup> Athenagoras the Athenian identifies God explicitly with the Existence, while the created things are associated with the non-existence. We find, in other words, the two realities, eternal and temporal, dealt with comparatively in one passage. Athenagoras characterizes matter itself as being created and perishable.<sup>14</sup>

Such teachings clearly dismiss any accusation that these patristic authors would have accepted the notion of a material substratum eternally coexisting with God. However, their references to the creation out of the unshaped matter, although comparatively few in number, raise a crucial question: how firmly were Justin the Martyr and Athenagoras of Athens attached to the doctrine of the creation *ex nihilo*? The case of Justin seems quite problematic because of his use of the expression “εκ ἀμορφῆς ὕλης.”<sup>15</sup> Opinions are divided, however: some researchers characterized him as Platonist or dualist in his cosmological conception, whereas others argue that, from what he affirms, it is possible to draw up a theory of creation.<sup>16</sup> We can also advance the hypothesis that Justin the Martyr developed a criticism of Plato mirroring the teachings of the Scripture. From this perspective, even his adherence to the idea of the preexistent matter does not exclude implicitly the doctrine of the creation *ex nihilo*. God could have created matter “out of nothing” before forming or ordering it. The support for this thesis relies on those texts of Justin the Martyr that describe God alternatively as Creator and as “ordering” or “adorning” the Universe.

## 2. GOD – THE CREATOR OF MATTER

But, except for the affirmations presented above, none of these writers, from the beginnings of classical patristical literature, offers any detailed presentation of the creation of matter. Consequently, it seems that the attempts to derive a doctrine of the creation *ex nihilo* from their writings needs to rely, as we have seen, on isolated sentences and interpretations, rather than on systematic analyses.

Tatian, Justin’s disciple, is the one providing clarity in this matter, possibly at his magister’s suggestions.<sup>17</sup> The notion of sequential creation, only vaguely suggested by Justin and Athenagoras, is articulated explicitly by Tatian in his work *Address to the Greeks (Oratio ad Graecos)*. Tatian postulates two distinct stages of creation: the first,<sup>18</sup> the initial stage, comprises the making of matter by means of the Word (the Logos);<sup>19</sup> the second,<sup>20</sup> the one in which matter is separated in parts and put in order, simultaneously to the beginning of the precise and irreversible flight of time. Despite his clear assertion that matter is created, he does not explain, explicitly, in technical terms, the creation of matter “out of nothing,” but continues, like his predecessors, to rely on Plato’s model of creation, namely that of the form imprinted on the raw material substratum. Although Tatian oscillates between clean faith and heresy, without establishing his firm ground in either of them, the idea he advanced that matter was created directly by God must not be associated with Gnosticism, except in the

<sup>13</sup> Justin Martirul, *Dialog...*, 5, in “P.S.B.”, vol. 2, pp. 98-99.

<sup>14</sup> Athénagore, *Supplique...*, VIII, X, XV, in col. “S.C.”, vol. 3, pp. 90, 92, 103.

<sup>15</sup> Justin Martirul, *Dialog...*, 59, in “P.S.B.”, vol. 2, p. 64.

<sup>16</sup> Atenagora Atenianul, *Solie în favoarea creștinilor*, IV, 2, in “P.S.B.”, vol. 2, pp. 376-377.

<sup>17</sup> Gerhard May, *Creatio ex Nihilo...*, p. 150.

<sup>18</sup> Tatien, *Le discours aux grecs*, V in Aimé Puech, *Recherches sur Le discours aux grecs de Tatien*, Felix Alcan, Editeur, Paris, 1903 p. 113.

<sup>19</sup> J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, Adam & Charles Black, London, 1968, pp. 95-101.

<sup>20</sup> Tatien, *Le discours...*, XII, pp. 123-124.



sense that it was expressed in the controversies that the Christian apologist had with the Gnostic theologians.

### 3. THE CREATION *EX NIHILO* – THE SEPARATION FROM PLATO’S VISION

A significant distance from these approaches can be found in the writings of Theophilus of Antioch, who for the first time affirms categorically the creation *ex nihilo*. His way of expressing this teaching has its source in a discussion on the various manners of addressing God.<sup>21</sup> All the names in question indicate God’s efficacy who “made everything from what does not exist, giving it existence.”<sup>22</sup>

Theophilus relies his affirmation on *2 Macabees* 7:28, pronouncing in his turn unequivocally the creation “out of nothing.” The way he understands God as supreme Creator, in the fullest sense of the word, differs from that of the Platonism, showing critical spirit to the affirmations in *Timaeus* 28 (which supported the paradox of the world’s coeternity with its Maker). He shows that if God and matter are both uncreated, eternal and immutable, then this contradiction compromises absolute divine sovereignty. Theophilus shows the same intransigence to the Platonist idea of the modelling of matter by a Demiurge, when he asks himself rhetorically: what would be so remarkable if God made the world out of preexistent matter?<sup>23</sup>

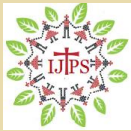
### CONCLUSIONS

When the Christians began entering into speculations about the origin of the Universe, they had the possibility to rely on the philosophical analyses and the argumentation surrounding a vibrant, continual discussion, in the circles of Middle Platonism. But they were faced, as well, with a serious semantic variation concerning certain elements of the vocabulary, concepts and intellectual premises. This disparity is particularly evident in concerns with the notion of “creation”. Although interpretations varied from thinker to thinker, the Platonists’ approach to the topic of creation was identified with “a putting in order” of an already existing substratum. The Christian thinkers, on the other hand, worked

<sup>21</sup> Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolycum* I, 4, p. 7: “He has no beginning because He is uncreated; He is immutable because He is immortal. He is called God because he established everything on His own *steadfastness* [Ps. 103: 5] and because He runs; the word ‘run’ means to run and set in motion and energize and nourish and provide and govern everything and to make everything alive. He is Lord because He is master of the universe, Father because He is before the universe, Demiurge and Maker because He is creator and maker of the universe, Most High because He is above everything, Almighty because He controls and surrounds everything. For *the heights* of the heavens and the depths of the abysses and *the end* of the world are *in His hand* [Ps. 94: 4], and there is no *place of His rest* [Isa. 66: 1]. The heavens are His work, earth is His creation, the sea is of His making, man is fabrication and image, sun and moon and stars are His elements, created *for signs and for seasons and for days and for years* [Gen. 1: 14], for service and *slavery to men* [Ps. 103: 14; 146: 8]. *God made everything out of what did not exist* [2 Macc. 7: 28], bringing it into existence so that his greatness might be known and apprehended through His works.”

<sup>22</sup> Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolycum* II, 10, p. 40-41: “In the first place, in complete harmony they taught us that He made everything out of the non-existent. For there was nothing coeval with God; He was His own locus; He lacked nothing; He *existed before the ages* [Ps. 54: 20]. He wished to make man so that He might be known by him; for him, then, He prepared the world. For he who is created has needs, but He who is uncreated lacks nothing. Therefore God, having His own Logos innate in His own bowels [cf. Ps. 109: 3], generated Him together with His own Sophia, *vomiting Him forth* [Ps. 44: 2] before everything else. He used this Logos as His servant in the things created by Him, and through Him He made all things [cf. John 1: 3]. He is called Beginning because He leads and dominates everything fashioned through Him.”

<sup>23</sup> Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolycum* II, 4, p. 27.



within the limits of the Scriptural tradition which conceived “the creation” literally, namely not only as a temporal (or atemporal) ordering, but as a “bringing into existence from nothing”.

This consideration is highlighted when we evaluate the possible limits of the Platonist influence on early Christian theories regarding the origins of the cosmos and of time. Although, at the surface, Justin the Martyr seems to overlook the radical difference between the Christian creation and the creation in a Platonist sense, supposing that the revealed text (*Genesis*) and Plato (*Timaeus*) presented similar teachings, it is more probable that his approach reflects rather his apologetic interests than his philosophic alliances. It is in a similar way that one should interpret the fact that Athenagoras does not refer at all to the approach of the creation from *Genesis*: as an intentional avoidance of the difficulties of aligning the Christian teaching to the Platonist thinking (vision).

From a methodological perspective, Tatian presents a greater grasp of the significance of the creation *ex nihilo* and of its philosophical implications. He insists on the created character of matter, although he continues to follow the cosmological ideas of Antiquity regarding the modelling of matter by a demiurgical act. Theophilus, in exchange, totally rids himself of the references to matter (excepting the critical terms). With him, we can observe the formation of a truly independent Christian understanding. Paradoxically, using the dialectical tools of Greek philosophy, he gets to structure a vision of creation quite alien to the intellectual tradition of Hellada.

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