

## *Creatio Continua Ex Electione:* A Post-Barthian Revision of the Doctrine of *Creatio Ex Nihilo*

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The case against the classical doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* continues to mount as arguments arise from all angles—historical, exegetical, and theological. Many of these critiques are aimed at the Hellenistic framework within which the Christian doctrine originally took shape. Others examine the ambiguities latent within the biblical texts themselves. In this paper I will identify three theological problems with the doctrine in conversation with three theologians. The first problem is the fact that the doctrine of “creation out of nothing” posits no material relationship between creation and redemption. Here I will engage the work of Catherine Keller, who attacks *creatio ex nihilo* but ends up perpetuating this same bifurcation between origin and *telos* in her conception of *creatio ex profundis*. The second problem is that “creation out of nothing” indicates no essential connection between the divine will to create and the divine being as creator. In this context I briefly take up the work of Jürgen Moltmann and assess his understanding of divine creation as a *creatio ex amore*. The third and final problem is the separation between creation and providence, between original creation and continuing creation. Here I briefly treat Schleiermacher’s account of creation in his *Glaubenslehre*. I conclude by using a modified version of Barth’s doctrine of election as the lens through which I reconcile these various strands in modern theology. I argue for what I call a *creatio continua ex electione*—a continuous creation out of divine election. In the end, I hope to show that this position addresses these three problems

while still upholding the necessary insights of the traditional doctrine of “creation out of nothing.”

## 1. THE PROBLEM OF CREATION AND REDEMPTION: CATHERINE KELLER

Among recent critiques of the traditional doctrine of creation, Catherine Keller’s *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* stands out as the best representative of a popular alternative.<sup>1</sup> In place of *creatio ex nihilo*, she proposes a *creatio ex profundis*, a “creation out of the watery depths,” which is her version of a process panentheistic theology of creation. She calls this a “tehomc panentheism,”<sup>2</sup> referring to the *tehom*, or the “deep,” of Genesis 1:2—what she views as the “primal chaos” of creative possibility. What makes her view unique is her sophisticated biblical exegesis, her appropriation of feminist and postmodern philosophy, and her engagement with the church fathers, Augustine, and Barth. My brief discussion of her position will, however, focus very specifically on the fact that her position fails to overcome—and, in fact, extends and embraces—a problem with the traditional *creatio ex nihilo*, namely, the lack of a material connection between creation and redemption.

As the subtitle of the book indicates, Keller stands in the tradition of Alfred Whitehead by positing creation as an ongoing process of “becoming” on the part of both God and the world. Not surprisingly, she rejects classical concepts like omnipotence and transcendence, because these lead to the “dominology” of masculine power rooted in classical ontotheology. Her *creatio ex profundis* is instead “a *creatio cooperationis*.”<sup>3</sup> God and the cosmos realize their ontic possibilities through a relationship of creative interdependence. She quotes a favorite line of hers from Whitehead: “It is as true to say that God creates the world, as that the world creates God.”<sup>4</sup> Not surprisingly, Keller’s theology leads her to rethink christology. Since

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

2 Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 218.

3 Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 117.

4 Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 181.

God becomes God through the creative processes of the cosmos, the incarnation is no longer a singular event but is rather the totality of this divine becoming. Hence, according to Keller, “Creation is always incarnation—and would have been so without the birth of the Nazarene.”<sup>5</sup> Her stated goal is to liberate us from all the binary oppositions that she deems to be oppressive or “dominological”—oppositions between creator and creature, between creation and incarnation.

Yet in liberating us from one kind of binary opposition, Keller ends up creating her own between the god of the philosophers—which she associates with any theologian who endorses *creatio ex nihilo* no matter how inappropriate (e.g., Karl Barth)—and the god of process theology. The irony of this bifurcation is that while her intention is to dispense with traditional metaphysical theology, she winds up promoting a deity whose attributes are metaphysically projected from the creature. The god of process theology is the deity already deconstructed by Feuerbach. Even more ironically, her *creatio ex profundis* reproduces one of the key problems with the traditional concept of *creatio ex nihilo*, in that neither the god of the philosophers nor the god of process theology is capable of accomplishing the one task that is absolutely essential for any creator to be able to achieve according to the Christian faith: namely, redemption. The god of the philosophers is too abstract by being pure actuality. The god of process theology is too abstract by being pure potentiality. Neither god can do anything new; neither can liberate. Keller has liberated God from dominology only by making God incapable of liberating us.<sup>6</sup>

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5 Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 226.

6 Process theology is also excessively bourgeois. The belief that a person should be able to realize redemption out of their own resources is only possible for those who have such resources at their disposal. Process theology is incomprehensible to the person seeking liberation from oppression and suffering. The attempt by process theologians to answer the theodicy question—however well-intentioned—does not succeed, because it is not an answer but an evasion. While traditionalists are rightly called to answer how an all-powerful God is not guilty for causing evil and suffering, it does no good to simply make God impotent. This is theologically and pastorally disastrous, because it means that whatever hope we may have had in an eschatologically new creation will have to be realized by us. When we are burdened with the task of self-liberation, any potential for eschatological *shalom* is replaced with a stoic acceptance of “reality,” a sense of helpless anxiety. The consequence of a hyper-“salvation by works” is simply greater oppression. Keller’s theology is, in the end, the complete opposite of a “theology of hope” because it is a “theology of glory” rather than a “theology of the cross.”

Whereas *creatio ex nihilo* is neutral regarding the relation between creation and consummation, Keller's *creatio ex profundis* is opposed to any such relation; her position severs the connection between creation and reconciliation. The problem becomes acute when Keller rejects the concept of grace altogether. She says that, in Barth's theology, "the dogma of creation as a relationship of 'grace,' i.e. unilateral dependency, rests upon the identification of God as absolute Owner and Origin."<sup>7</sup> She then goes on to assert that "the position of grace" is inherently a form of sexist "dominology," because it identifies the recipient of grace as subordinate to the giver of grace.<sup>8</sup> For Keller, grace is actually offensive, in that it presumes one is in need of grace. For her theology of becoming, however, both creator and cosmos are in need of each other; there is no sin, no oppression, no estrangement—and therefore also no salvation. Not surprisingly, she laments the fact that liberation theologians gravitate to the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. For example, after praising Moltmann's liberating theology of hope, she criticizes the fact that he "trades his hope upon the transcendent power of the Creator, who *guarantees* the new creation—as *ново creatio ex nihilo*."<sup>9</sup> Yet while this relationship between liberator and liberated is indeed one of grace, it is of course not a dominological relationship but precisely the opposite. The event of liberating grace is the very deconstruction of dominology, in that God liberates people *out of* relations of domination: bondage to Pharaoh in the story of Exodus and bondage to sin and death in the story of Christ. The same unilateral guarantee of the new creation that Keller finds so problematic, liberation theologians rightly identify as the heart of the Christian faith. Without this guarantee, without a liberating God of grace who unilaterally interrupts systems of oppression, there is no actual hope that God will one day rectify the unjust social orders currently enslaving humanity.

In the end, Keller is helpful in that she identifies by way of sheer exaggeration a problem latent within the traditional doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. The classical formulation is an expression of divine omnipotence in the abstract, dissociated from any teleological orientation. It presents

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7 Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 89.

8 Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 95.

9 Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 20.

creation as an act of raw power without connection to christology, soteriology, and eschatology. Keller is thus right to criticize it, though her alternative fares no better. If we are going to speak of a “creation out of the depths,” as Keller does, then it must be the depths of God’s reconciling and redeeming love. For this, we must turn now to Moltmann.

## 2. THE PROBLEM OF BEING AND WILL: JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN

In sharp contrast to Keller, Jürgen Moltmann begins his theology of creation by acknowledging the relation of creation to reconciliation: “a Christian doctrine of creation is a view of the world in the light of Jesus the Messiah.”<sup>10</sup> Creation exists for the sake of the consummation of creation in the eschatological sabbath.<sup>11</sup> This much is basic to Moltmann’s theology due to its eschatological orientation. Within his understanding of creation, however, is an important debate regarding whether creation proceeds from the divine will or the divine being. This is the second problem that *creatio ex nihilo*, in its standard form, fails to adequately address.

Moltmann’s account of this problem begins by differentiating between creation as decree and creation as emanation. The former, which he associates with the Reformed tradition, understands God’s activity in terms of a divine decree or determination to do something. In the case of creation, God “determines that he will be the world’s Creator,”<sup>12</sup> and this determination is an act of divine freedom rather than necessity; it is an act of free will that does not have an ontological basis in the divine essence. Moltmann identifies Barth as the key modern figure in this tradition. Opposed

10 Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 4–5.

11 Cf. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 276–77: “The goal and completion of every Jewish and every Christian doctrine of creation must be the doctrine of the sabbath . . . The sabbath opens creation for its true future. . . . If we look at the biblical traditions that have to do with the belief in creation, we discover that the sabbath is not a day of rest following six working days. On the contrary: the whole work of creation was performed *for the sake of the sabbath*.” It’s worth noting that Moltmann offers a tidy rejection of process theology in his book, specifically criticizing Whitehead’s rejection of *creatio ex nihilo*: “God and nature are fused into a unified world process, so that the theology of nature becomes a divinization of nature. . . . But this means that process theology of this kind has no doctrine of creation. It is conversant only with a doctrine about the preservation and ordering of the world” (Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 78–79).

12 Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 79–80.

to this is the idea of creation out of the divine being, i.e., creation as creative emanation. Basic to the doctrine of emanation is the view that God “is essentially creative” and thus creation “is not an event *within* the life of God. It is ‘identical’ with his life. Creation is neither chance nor necessity. It is God’s ‘destiny.’”<sup>13</sup> Creation in this view is not an act of will secondary to God’s being; rather, “the divine life is creative by reason of its eternal nature.”<sup>14</sup> Here Moltmann identifies Paul Tillich as the key modern figure. The problem with a Barthian creation from divine will is that it tends to speculate about what God “might have done,” and thus separates God’s being or nature from God’s act or will.<sup>15</sup> The problem with a Tillichian creation from divine life is that “it becomes difficult to distinguish between God’s creatures and God’s eternal creation of himself.”<sup>16</sup>

Moltmann’s project is an attempt to move beyond these two options. Whereas creation from the divine will locates creation in the economic Trinity, creation from the divine being locates creation in the immanent Trinity. Moltmann, continuing his trinitarian project in *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, questions the traditional separation between the immanent and economic. Such a split intends to protect divine freedom, but as Moltmann rightly states, “God is not entirely free when he can do and leave undone what he likes; he is entirely free when he is entirely himself.”<sup>17</sup> Hence, he argues that “it is important to maintain the identity of the divine life and the divine creative activity.”<sup>18</sup> Instead of a creation from decision *versus* a creation from being, Moltmann suggests that we understand God’s resolve to create as an “essential resolve” and God’s creative being as the

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13 Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 83.

14 Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 83.

15 Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 82. Moltmann’s claim depends upon the view that Barth maintains an abstract freedom of God in his doctrine of creation: God could have acted otherwise. God’s being and God’s act are not mutually determinative. While Barth certainly offers statements that tend in this direction, he is by no means consistent in this view and such statements occur primarily in his earlier writings. Barth’s mature doctrine of election in *Church Dogmatics* II/2 finally precludes any separation between essence and will, and we see the fruit of this in his doctrine of creation (CD III) and doctrine of reconciliation (CD IV). Though it is not my concern in this paper, here I will simply point out that Moltmann greatly oversimplifies Barth’s theology by reducing him to one side of this binary opposition.

16 Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 84.

17 Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 82–83.

18 Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 84.

“resolved essence” of God.<sup>19</sup> God’s essence and existence, being and will, are identical, and both are creative. God’s being simply *is* the decision to be the creator, reconciler, and redeemer.

Moltmann unites being and will in his definition of God as love: “The unity of will and nature in God can be appropriately grasped through the concept of love. God loves the world with the very same love which he eternally *is*.”<sup>20</sup> If God is by nature love, and this love is always intrinsically oriented to the creaturely other, then there is no split in content between God’s immanent life and economic activity. Who God is and what God does are ontologically identical. Borrowing from the theology of Catherine LaCugna, we can therefore define this doctrine of creation as a *creatio ex amore*—a creation out of love:

To be sure, the reason for creation does not lie in the creature, or in some claim the creature has on God. It would make no sense to say that God ‘needs’ the world in order to be God, if this sets up the creature as a higher or more ultimate principle than God; the creature would have to preexist God so that God could be constituted as God in relation to the creature. This is absurd, since God and the creature simply would have switched places. The reason for creation lies entirely in the unfathomable mystery of God, who is self-originating *and* self-communicating love. While the world is the gracious result of divine freedom, God’s freedom means *necessarily* being who and what God is. From this standpoint the world is not created *ex nihilo* but *ex amore, ex condilectione*, that is, out of divine love.<sup>21</sup>

For both Moltmann and LaCugna, the concept of love encompasses both the immanent and economic life of God, and thus love unites both nature and will. Creation is not a secondary act, but flows instead from the primary definition of God: *deus est caritas*.<sup>22</sup>

While there is much to commend here, the position of *creatio ex amore* falls short in that both Moltmann and LaCugna, along with almost everyone in the social trinitarian camp, define the being of God via an analogical

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19 Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 85.

20 Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 85.

21 Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 355. Cf. Elizabeth T. Gropp, “Creation *Ex Nihilo* and *Ex Amore*: Ontological Freedom in the Theologies of John Zizioulas and Catherine Mowry LaCugna,” *Modern Theology* 21, no.3 (2005): 469–73.

22 Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 86.

projection of human being upon the divine, which is then used to validate a particular form of human social relations. This movement from human to divine to human again is made possible through the (mis)use of the word “person.” Human persons are defined as acting subjects with an independent will; hence, the trinitarian “persons” are defined as three acting subjects with three individual wills who are brought into unity through a mysterious perichoretic indwelling. The social trinitarian argument then seeks to authorize an egalitarian politics by appealing to the mutual indwelling of the divine persons as the archetypal form of personhood.<sup>23</sup> The problem with social trinitarianism is that it is simply a modern version of the ancient *via eminentiae* mode of metaphysical thinking about God; it is a type of projectionism that again falls under the critique of Feuerbach. There is no intrinsic connection in Moltmann’s account between the love of God and the person of Jesus Christ as the one who actually defines divine love.

Moltmann’s alternative understanding of creation as *creatio ex amore* goes a long way toward addressing the problems with *creatio ex nihilo*. The unity of creation and redemption on the one hand, and the unity of God’s being and will on the other, are both incorporated into his account of “creation out of love.” The aporia in his account is located in the fact that God’s love is not defined on the basis of God’s particular act of revelation. Love is a general anthropological phenomenon, not a concrete divine event in the singular reality of Jesus Christ. As a result, it remains fatally abstract. Moltmann talks about love as the ground of creation, without defining this love christologically.

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23 See Kathryn Tanner, “Kingdom Come: The Trinity and Politics,” *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 28, no. 2 (2007): 129–45. Tanner’s critique of social trinitarianism is consummate. Among other things, she states: “No matter how close the similarities between human and divine persons, differences always remain. God is not us, and this sets up the major problem for theologies that want to base conclusions about human relationships on the Trinity. . . . So, for example, it seems bound up with their essential finitude that human persons can only metaphorically be in one another, if that means having overlapping subjectivities in the way the persons of the Trinity do. Because all the other members of the Trinity are in that person, when one person of the Trinity acts the others are necessarily acting, too. Clearly this does not hold for human persons: I may enter empathetically into the one I love, but that does not mean I act when my beloved does” (136–38). For a revised and expanded version of this essay, see Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (New York: Cambridge, 2010), 207–46.



### 3. THE PROBLEM OF CREATION AND PRESERVATION: SCHLEIERMACHER

The third problem with *creatio ex nihilo* is the relation between creation and preservation. The doctrine of “creation out of nothing” posits a disjunction between these two concepts: between a once-for-all act and the ongoing activity of sustaining the world. Like the previous two dichotomies, this one also needs to be rethought. The work of Friedrich Schleiermacher hints at a way forward.

In his *Glaubenslehre*, Schleiermacher critically examines the received wisdom that distinguishes between *creatio originalis* and *creatio continua*. The former is defined as the originating act of bringing the cosmos into existence, while the latter is God’s providential preservation of this creation throughout history. Schleiermacher questions the logic behind this distinction: on the one hand, since the progressive creation of what presently exists reveals “the active continuance of formative forces,” there is nothing which cannot “be brought under the concept of Preservation”; on the other hand, since preservation “is equivalent to that alternation of changes and movements in which their being perdures,” the entire process of preservation in fact “falls under the conception of creation.”<sup>24</sup> Depending on which perspective you take, creation or preservation becomes superfluous.

Schleiermacher criticizes the tradition for giving the impression that God alternates between activity and rest, as if God were active at some moments but not at others—a view deriving from an overly literal reading of the creation account in Genesis 1. This movement between activity and passivity runs counter to his theology, which begins with the absolute dependence of all things upon God. If God is not eternally *actus purus*, then our dependence upon God is not absolute, and our entire relation with God is threatened. Not surprisingly, Schleiermacher endorses the

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<sup>24</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (New York: T & T Clark, 1999), §38, 146–47.

doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, because the existence of any material independent of God's creative activity "would destroy the feeling of absolute dependence."<sup>25</sup> Of course, one need not accept this starting-point to still find the distinction between *creatio originalis* and *creatio continua* arbitrary and unnecessary.

Schleiermacher himself provides us with a more theologically sound reason to unify creation and preservation in his very brief but suggestive comments on whether creation is a temporal or eternal activity. He finds Origen lacking because God is brought into the realm of temporal change. But he also finds Augustine problematic when the latter posits an act of divine will to explain the transition—only this time the move is not from inactivity to activity but from willing to doing. For Schleiermacher, this is no solution; the transition from one to the other, however these are conceived, remains unexplained on the basis of God's revelation, viz., christology. Against the traditional attempt to identify a point of transition from the *ad intra* to the *ad extra* in the life of God—an attempt that is always hopelessly speculative in nature—Schleiermacher argues that the *ad intra* can only be the eternal actualization of what occurs in the economy. According to John 1, if the eternal Logos created the cosmos, then "the tracing of the Word through which God created the world . . . back to the Word which was with God from eternity, can never be made clearly intelligible if there is not an eternal creation through the eternal Word."<sup>26</sup> Schleiermacher's logic is that if the Word created the world, and if this creative Word is the same Word from all eternity, then creation is also essentially eternal.

With this christological argument, we have a position that can bring together original creation and continuing creation. According to Schleiermacher, there is no change in God from non-creative to creative. The decision to create is not one decision among others that God chose to actualize after a prior deliberation. There is no sense in speaking about how God might not have created. Thinking along such lines "assume[s] an antithesis between freedom and necessity" and places God "within the realm

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25 Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §41, 153.

26 Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §41, 156.

of contradictions.”<sup>27</sup> That is, such speculation makes God only relatively rather than absolutely transcendent. According to Schleiermacher, what God does now is true of God eternally, since God is “pure act.” Consequently, the line of demarcation between creation and preservation becomes indeterminate. Rather than dispense with one or the other, we can make them eternally coterminous. Schleiermacher’s understanding of creation thus addresses the previous two problems with *creatio ex nihilo*: (1) creation is an eternal activity that has the appearance of the mediator included within it as its *telos*, and (2) the being of God is eternally creative, so that creation is the proper expression of God’s very essence. As significant as this account of creation is, Schleiermacher’s position, like Moltmann’s, remains too abstract. The creative activity of God is posited on the basis of a general anthropological given, viz., the feeling of absolute dependence. God’s creative activity, while intrinsically related to redemption, is not determined by the concrete revelatory event in which that redemption occurs. What we need is an account of creation in which redemption is not simply the necessary end, but is also creation’s eternal ground and origin. The resources for such a position are found in Karl Barth.

#### 4. CONCLUSION: *CREATIO CONTINUA EX ELECTIONE*

Instead of *creatio ex nihilo*, the position for which I am arguing may be called *creatio continua ex electione*, a “continuous creation out of election.” This position takes its bearings from a modified version of Barth’s doctrine of election, the specifics of which can only be hinted at here. Without rehearsing the details of Barth’s doctrine, it will suffice to note that, in the second volume of his *Church Dogmatics*,<sup>28</sup> Barth identifies Jesus Christ as both the subject and object of election. The consequences of this move are vast and hotly debated. All sides in these debates agree on the following four basic points: (1) God’s election is the first of all God’s works *ad extra*, (2) election is God’s self-determination to be God-for-us,

27 Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §41, 156.

28 Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, 4 vols. in 13 parts (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag A. G., 1932–1970); hereafter cited as *KD*. ET Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, 4 vols. in 13 parts (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956–1975); hereafter cited as *CD*.

(3) all other acts of God flow from the decision of election as their unifying origin and end, and (4) election concerns God's reconciliation of the world within the covenant of grace.

The result of the first point is that Barth sides with supralapsarianism over infralapsarianism where the orders of the divine decrees are concerned. While he drastically reworks this entire Reformed debate, he nevertheless stands with the supralapsarians in making the decree of election prior to and determinative for the decree of creation. The major change he makes is in identifying Jesus Christ, the incarnate one, as the subject of this decree in addition to its object. The second point, in connection with the first, is the source of the current so-called "Grace and Being" controversy,<sup>29</sup> but at the very least both sides agree that the only God we actually encounter is the God who is eternally *pro nobis*, the God who has elected to be with us and for us in Jesus Christ. What that might mean for the logical relation between triunity and election is irrelevant to the concerns of this paper. The third point affirms that if election is definitive for who God is, then all the other divine works are grounded in this prior and determinative decision of election. Most significantly for my thesis here, this means that the covenant of grace is the "internal basis" of creation, while creation is the "external basis" of the covenant.<sup>30</sup> The position I sketch below is a reworking of this dialectical relation between covenant and creation. Finally, the fourth point is simply descriptive of what election means in Barth's theology, viz., that it is the divine decision which constitutes the Christ-event as the reconciliation of all things to God (cf. 2 Cor 5:19).

What follows is my brief and provisional attempt to think through the relation between election, christology, and creation *after* and *beyond* Barth. My primary concern is to elaborate a doctrine of creation that addresses the above problems, but, because this involves correlating creation and election, I will also offer a revised doctrine of election. In doing so, I self-consciously depart from Barth, though a full explanation for why this is so will have to wait for a future occasion. Briefly, the issue is that Barth

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29 So called because the origin of the debate was the essay by Bruce L. McCormack, "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 92–110.

30 See *CD* III/1, §41.

makes election to be primarily protological in character. It is a one-time act in pre-temporal eternity that establishes the basis for the covenant of grace. In this sense, it has an intriguing parallel to the traditional conception of creation as a one-time act—depending on whom you ask, an act in time or eternity—that establishes the basis for God’s ongoing work of providence. It is tempting, and all too easy based on what Barth says, to criticize his position for being just as abstract as the *decretum absolutum* that he attacks. He certainly opens himself to such criticism when he contrasts “the eternal covenant concerning humanity that God made with himself in his pre-temporal eternity” with “the covenant of grace between God and humanity whose establishment and execution in time were decided by that election.”<sup>31</sup> One quite naturally draws the conclusion from such passages that election is a finished act in the eternal past which only becomes manifest in time through the history of Jesus Christ. Even if one historicizes election and identifies it with the life history of Jesus Christ, it remains, on this reading, a past event that happened once and now only needs to be acknowledged.

As prominent as such themes are in Barth’s theology, to his great credit, he complicates this interpretation in a small-print section near the end of §33.<sup>32</sup> In this section, Barth criticizes the “traditional teaching,” derived by way of contrast with mutable human decrees, that “saw in predestination an isolated and given enactment [*eine abgeschlossen vorliegende Verfügung*]” which eternally “entangled and bound” God in relation to time.<sup>33</sup> According to this view, “God *willed once* in the pre-temporal eternity when the decree was conceived and established,” and therefore “the *living quality* of this action is *perfectum*, eternal *past*.”<sup>34</sup> God elected at one time, but this electing decision “now *no longer* takes place.”<sup>35</sup> What God does in the present is merely an “echo” (*Nachklang*) of the past decree of God. As a result, such a God is not living but dead. Barth even compares this view

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31 CD II/2, 104; KD II/2, 111–12. Translation revised. Future revisions will be marked as “rev.”

32 CD II/2, 181–84; KD II/2, 198–202.

33 CD II/2, 181 (rev); KD II/2, 198.

34 CD II/2, 181; KD II/2, 199. My translation with original italics restored. All future italics are restored from the original German.

35 CD II/2, 181; KD II/2, 199. My translation.

of predestination with deism, because of the sharp and static separation between the eternal being of God and temporal, worldly existence.<sup>36</sup>

Against the deistic model of election that he finds in Protestant orthodoxy, Barth claims that “God’s decree is not lifeless, but rather infinitely more alive than any human decree.”<sup>37</sup> What he means by this, though, requires some careful elucidation. On the one hand, he explicitly and rightly stresses that the life of God, defined by God’s electing decision, “has the character not only of an unparalleled ‘perfect’ but also of an unparalleled ‘present’ and ‘future.’”<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, Barth is very clear that the only reason the decision of election is present and future is because it is completed and finished in the past. That is to say, the decision itself is not present and future, but rather only its significance. Barth uses strong language to convey this point. He says that God’s eternal decision “has the full weight of the eternal ‘perfect,’” that it is “completed and isolated” (*vollbracht und abgeschlossen*), that it “precedes all creaturely life,” and finally that it “stands harder than steel and granite before and above all things and all events.”<sup>39</sup> In all these statements, Barth stands in basic continuity with the tradition of the *decretum absolutum*. But lest we misunderstand him, Barth explains that this decision did not happen only “back before time” (*vor der Zeit zurück*) as the tradition had it, but rather it is simultaneously “pre-temporal” (*vorzeitlich*), “supra-temporal” (*überzeitlich*), and “post-temporal” (*nachzeitlich*) in its eternal actuality.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, election is not an ongoing and ever-present decision here and now. On the contrary, even though it is completed and finished in the eternal past, because God is present and future as the predestinating Lord over creation, the decision of election remains present and future in its living significance for us. Barth thus states, over against the *decretum absolutum*, that “God is never a mere echo; he is and remains and always will be an independent tone and sound.”<sup>41</sup>

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36 Cf. *CD II/2*, 182; *KD II/2*, 200.

37 *CD II/2*, 183 (rev); *KD II/2*, 201.

38 *CD II/2*, 183; *KD II/2*, 201.

39 *CD II/2*, 183 (rev); *KD II/2*, 201.

40 *CD II/2*, 183 (rev); *KD II/2*, 201.

41 *CD II/2*, 183 (rev); *KD II/2*, 201.

Barth's position has some distinct positives and negatives that stand in some tension. On the positive side, Barth clearly wants to understand the decision of election as an ongoing divine event. He says that because it is a "concrete decree," election "never ceases to be *event*."<sup>42</sup> This event of election occurs as "history, encounter, and decision," and for that reason it is an "act of divine life in the Spirit" (*Akt göttlichen Geisteslebens*).<sup>43</sup> This peculiar phrase is unique to this section of the *Dogmatics*. It occurs only three times, and all of them in the two paragraphs of the large-print passage directly following Barth's rejection of the deistic character of the traditional doctrine of predestination.<sup>44</sup> Barth seems to indicate by this divine life-in-the-Spirit that election is concretely and actively related to the particularities of historical existence. It is not an abstract decision in eternity over against time; rather, it is a living decision in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. This is the profound and creative aspect of Barth's doctrine that I wish to appropriate. The negative aspect of Barth's understanding of election is due to the fact that he does not draw out the provocative implications of this notion for the rest of his theology. The possibilities latent within the idea of election as an "act of divine life in the Spirit" are mostly unrealized. He draws upon it in opposition to deism, but then drops it when it no longer suits his polemical purposes. If he had stayed more consistent with this insight, he would not have emphasized the eternally past and perfected character of election as much as he does.<sup>45</sup>

42 *CD II/2*, 184; *KD II/2*, 202.

43 *CD II/2*, 184; *KD II/2*, 202.

44 The three occurrences are: "Only as concrete decree, only as an act of divine life in the Spirit, is it the law which precedes all creaturely life" (*CD II/2*, 184; *KD II/2*, 202); "Since it is itself history, encounter and decision, since it is an act of divine life in the Spirit, since it is the unbroken and lasting determining and decreeing of Him who as Lord of all things has both the authority and the power for such activity, it is the presupposition of all movement of creaturely life" (*ibid.*, rev.); "But it is an act of divine life in the Spirit, an act which affects us, an act which occurs in the very midst of time no less than in that far distant pre-temporal eternity" (*CD II/2*, 185 [rev]; *KD II/2*, 204). The translators of this volume rendered the latter two instances of "divine life in the spirit," as "in the Spirit," for no apparent reason.

45 Eberhard Jüngel, in his interpretation of Barth's doctrine of election, makes this phrase ("act of divine life in the Spirit") central to Barth's theology in a way that is creative and interesting, though perhaps a bit of a stretch considering how marginal it is to the *Church Dogmatics*. Throughout the rest of the work, Barth's use of *Geistesleben* is almost exclusively used to speak of *human* life-in-the-Spirit or "spiritual life," and it is often used pejoratively because of the Schleiermacherian connotations. A typical example is this passage from the first volume: "God reveals himself as the Spirit, not as any spirit, not as the basis of humanity's spiritual life [*des menschlichen Geisteslebens*] which we can discover and awaken, but

The claim I make here is that a more pneumatic-actualistic conception of election—understood as a divine act in the Spirit (of Christ) here and now—allows for a correspondingly actualistic conception of creation as a continuous divine act in every new moment. I do not mean to contrast a “pneumatic-actualistic” election with Barth’s christocentric election in which Jesus Christ is both subject and object of the divine decree. On the contrary, I mean this pneumatological revision to occur *within* the framework set forth by Barth. I understand this in the following way: the divine life-in-the-Spirit that constitutes the living actuality of election takes place *within* the event of Jesus Christ. The awakening work of the Spirit does not simply point toward a finished and completed reality in the past; it is rather constitutive of the event itself. This is because the Jesus whose history constitutes the decision of election is the same one who also sent the Spirit into the world (cf. John 20:22). As I understand it, therefore, the *Christus praesens* is the ongoing and infinite repetition of the singularity of Jesus Christ in our midst through the Spirit’s power. The Spirit does not enable a mere “recollection” of a “completed and isolated” election. Instead, the Spirit actualizes the contingent “repetition”<sup>46</sup> of Christ’s election in both hidden and manifest forms, thus extending the originating event to embrace new concrete particularities without relying on a metaphysical “logic of assumption”<sup>47</sup> whereby Christ’s humanity is the general *humanitas* of all human beings.

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as the Spirit of the Father and the Son . . .” (*CD I/1*, 332 [rev]; *KD I/1*, 351). The notion of a *divine* life-in-the-Spirit does not make another appearance outside of the two paragraphs in §33, as far as I can tell. Nevertheless, as an interpretation of Barth that seeks to bring him into a positive relation with Bultmann, Jüngel is right to emphasize this concept. It also shows his keen eye for easily overlooked, but deeply insightful, elements in Barth’s theology. See Eberhard Jüngel, *God’s Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth. A Paraphrase*, trans. John Webster (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 91–92.

46 I use the terms “recollection” and “repetition” in the technical sense set forth by Kierkegaard. For an excellent scholarly treatment of this theme, see Niels Nymann Eriksen, *Kierkegaard’s Category of Repetition: A Reconstruction*, Kierkegaard Studies: Monograph Series 5 (Berlin; New York: W. de Gruyter, 2000).

47 Cf. Edwin Chr. van Driel, “The Logic of Assumption,” in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 265–90. See also Edwin Chr. van Driel, *Incararnation Anyway: Arguments for Supralapsarian Christology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 138–42. While I accept some of van Driel’s critiques of Barth on this point, I do not accept his christological proposal as the proper alternative, as compelling as some of its features may be.



In this proposal, election is “new every morning.” It is always a decision-in-becoming as a divine act in the Spirit. Contrary to Barth’s emphasis on protology, my focus is rather on eschatology—understood as an eschatological interruption in the present. What happens in the present and the future is *not* simply the noetic acknowledgement or recognition of what has already happened on behalf of all in Jesus Christ. Rather it is Christ himself confronting us today, proclaiming the divine “Yes” to us and to all. The act of election is thus no eternally past or perfect decision, but it repeatedly occurs as a particular, concrete event in the pentecostal totality of Christ’s past, present, and future historicity. As a result, election is not a one-time act occurring in a pre-temporal eternity; it is rather an always-new decision here and now that takes place as God interrupts the world in Jesus Christ through the Spirit. Election itself is a continuous election: it is God’s continuous reaffirmation of Godself as God-for-us and God’s continuous reaffirmation of the creature as creature-for-God. Election is thus an ongoing event in the “eternal now” (*nunc eternum*). It has never not taken place, and therefore one cannot get behind it to find a more primordial understanding of God or the world.

The move from election to creation is straightforward. If election is God’s eternal decision in Jesus Christ to be in covenant fellowship with the creaturely other, then election itself posits or establishes creation as the theodramatic stage for God’s covenant of grace. Creation derives wholly from and exists wholly for God’s reconciliation and redemption of humankind. As Barth writes in his *Church Dogmatics*, Jesus Christ “is with the world—a world created by him, for him, and to him—as the theater [*Schauplatz*] of God’s history with humanity and of humanity’s history with God.”<sup>48</sup> And later he says that God’s creation “of all the reality distinct from God took place on the basis of this purposed covenant and with a view to its execution.”<sup>49</sup> God’s decision to elect Jesus Christ is simultaneously God’s decision to create. God elects, and the world is brought into existence. Election is of course logically prior to creation, but they coincide temporally. More importantly, they coincide in the person of Jesus Christ, as the Word in the beginning through whom the world

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48 CD II/2, 94 (rev); KD II/2, 101.

49 CD III/3, 36; KD III/3, 41.

came into being (John 1:10)—and simultaneously as the Word of God’s future that speaks to us here and now in the eschatological moment and will speak to us again. Creation, we can thus say, is an eternal act rooted in the eternal Word of God who is self-determined by the eternal decision of election. To be more specific, the definitive act of creation is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, and this creative act repeats itself in the justifying word that declares new life to dead sinners. Creation, properly speaking, is *new creation*. We cannot isolate an old creation, or “nature,” from which to draw general theological or ethical concepts. Our only epistemic access to creation is *through* election, and thus through the Spirit of God who meets us in the word that justifies sinners. Moreover, since election is a continuous christological event, so too is creation. If creation is an ever-new occurrence, then very little if any distinction remains between creation and preservation—an insight which, as John Walton has recently argued, has exegetical merit.<sup>50</sup> Preservation, I am arguing, is simply the continuous giving of existence to creation. Creation, like election, is “new every morning.”<sup>51</sup>

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50 In his recent book, John Walton argues that Genesis 1 presents a “functional ontology” (as opposed to a “material ontology”) in which the creative activity of God primarily concerns the establishment of functions, or the institution of purpose, within the cosmos. See John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One: Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 16–46, 119–24. According to Walton, Genesis is neutral with regard to the material origins of the cosmos, which is why he says that *creatio ex nihilo* is a misinterpretation of the text, even if it has theological warrant as a logically necessary position (43). The result of Walton’s exegetical analysis is that the divine acts of creating and sustaining are brought very close together. What God creates, according to Genesis, are creaturely functions, and this act of creation involves simultaneously the preservation of these functions. Creation is “ongoing and dynamic” because God “continues to sustain the functions moment by moment” for the sake of accomplishing God’s covenant purposes (121). Walton, however, still maintains a distinction between creation and preservation, because the “continuing activity is not the *same* as the activity of the six days, but it is the reason why the six days took place” (122). Walton interprets Genesis 1 as the establishment of the cosmic temple, in which the Sabbath is the fulfillment of the six days precisely because it is the event in which God descends to dwell within the temple. For this reason, the distinction between the six days and the seventh—between creation and preservation—is essential to preserve the Sabbath-oriented temple theology that forms the heart of the Genesis account. Nevertheless, “the line between [them] is dotted rather than solid, as the narrative of Genesis 1 puts God in place to perpetuate the functions after they are established in the six days” (122). For this reason, “both originating and sustaining can be seen as variations of the work of the Creator, even though they do not entirely merge together” (123). All of God’s works, from creation to redemption, are acts of “bringing order to disorder,” directing the cosmos toward its fulfillment in the eschatological reign of Christ.

51 In an essay on the concept of history in Christian thought, Erich Frank affirms the notion of a continuous or eternal creation on the grounds that creation is a divine act that

I have called this position *creatio continua ex electione*. I define creation as *continua* because it is not a single event back in the past but rather a moment-by-moment actualization of the world's existence, and it is *ex electione* because creation has no independent status apart from the election of grace. The *continua* means that God's relation to the world is non-competitive in character. Against deism and interventionism, both of which place God and creation over against each other as static competitive entities, *creatio continua* understands God's continuous activity of creation to be "paradoxically identical" (Bultmann) with the formative forces within nature. At the same time, the *ex electione* identifies God's relation to the world as apocalyptic in character, since creation coincides with God's eschatological activity of electing the world in Christ in every new moment. God's act of creating is thus an apocalyptic act in which God radically interrupts us—and, by extension, the whole cosmic order—in Jesus Christ. Creation as new creation (*creatio nova*) is not an objective fact, a visible given; rather, it is an eschatological and existential reality, located in God's future, which irrupts into our present reality in the pneumatic event of the proclaimed Word. When we hear the word of grace in the eternal now, our election and creation are simultaneously actualized and affirmed. To summarize, whereas *creatio continua* is God's moment-by-moment actualization of creation through the Word spoken by God from the beginning, *creatio ex electione* is an apocalyptic event in which that same Word, Jesus Christ, is spoken *to us*. Put another way, *creatio conti-*

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transcends finite, creaturely actions. Therefore, creation does not have a finite beginning and end. It is an eternal action, an event that takes place in eternity. For this reason, it can always occur anew existentially. In God's encounter with us, creation takes place in the "eschatological moment," in the eternal now (*nunc eternum*). Frank writes: "The creation of the world is not an event in this observable and measurable time but belongs to the realm of eternity; it is the very moment when eternity touches upon time and thus makes time measurable for the first time. . . . An eternal moment as that of creation—(any first beginning or ultimate end)—is incommensurable with observable time (duration). Since creation belongs to the realm of eternity, philosophical reason may think of it as being 'at any time,' that is, as a 'continuous or eternal creation.' But imagined as a moment in measurable time, it becomes an 'eschatological moment' to us. To imagine a time before or after time is an obvious fallacy, although we cannot refrain from doing so since we do not have an adequate idea of eternity and can imagine eternity only in terms of time. Yet such an eschatological moment is not a beginning or end *in* time but *of* time. There is no time before or after, only eternity. In such an event the whole world—time, anything—and especially our reason comes to an end." Erich Frank, "The Role of History in Christian Thought," *The Duke Divinity School Bulletin* 14, no. 3 (1949): 66–77 (72).

*nua* is the moment-by-moment act of God that makes it possible for *this* moment to be the “day of salvation.”<sup>52</sup>

In conclusion, creation as *creatio continua ex electione* has a number of advantages over the received tradition of *creatio ex nihilo*. First, *creatio ex electione* upholds the basic insight of *creatio ex nihilo*, since nothing stands behind God’s decision to elect; nothing conditions God’s self-determination. God’s self-determination to be the one who elects and creates is an act of divine freedom to be the God who covenants with humanity.<sup>53</sup> Second, at the same time, my proposal focuses our attention upon Jesus Christ and the reconciliation accomplished in him, whereas the traditional formula distracts us by focusing on nothingness and chaos. The arcane debates over whether matter was already existent when God created the cosmos are both irrelevant and a misunderstanding of what creation actually entails. To speak about our creation is strictly to speak about our self-understanding as those elected and reconciled in Christ. Third, this position does justice to Moltmann’s *creatio ex amore*, since election is by its very nature a divine decision of love for the world. And because this electing decision is determinative for God’s very being, creation too is rooted

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52 The creation-event thus follows the contours of the Christ-event. In the same way that, in my christological proposal, *Christus praeteritus* (the past Christ) and *Christus futurus* (the future Christ) coincide in *Christus praesens* (the present Christ), so too *creatio praeterita* and *creatio futura* coincide in *creatio praesens*. Creation and election occur here and now in the present-tense reality of Jesus Christ who confronts the world anew in every moment.

53 With Schleiermacher, I reject applying the dichotomy of freedom and necessity to God’s act of creation. To say that God created (and elected) in freedom is not the same thing as saying that God could have acted otherwise, i.e., that creation (and election) are purely contingent decisions, or that God would still be God had God not elected or created. Such statements—whether or not they might have correct insights—place God within the realm of creaturely antinomies, as Schleiermacher rightly states. God’s freedom is not a *liberum arbitrium* (free will); it is rather the expression of God’s self-determined identity. Barth can even say that God is “free also with regard to his freedom . . . to use it to give himself to this communion [*Gemeinschaft*] and to practice this *faithfulness* in it, in this way being truly free, free in himself” (*CD* II/1, 303 [rev]; *KD* II/1, 341). God is simultaneously unconditioned and conditioned, or rather he transcends this binary opposition altogether by the fact that God is self-conditioning, self-determining, for the sake of being conditioned and determined for the covenant of grace. Perhaps the most mature statement regarding God’s freedom comes in *CD* IV/1, where Barth writes regarding the divine decree: “What takes place is the divine fulfilment [*Verwirklichung*] of a divine decree [*Dekret*]. It takes place in the freedom of God, but in the inner necessity of the freedom of God and not in the play of a sovereign *liberum arbitrium*” (*CD* IV/1, 195; *KD* IV/1, 213; original italics restored). Within the freedom of God there lies an “inner necessity,” an inner determination to be God-for-us in Jesus Christ. God’s creation of the world, since it follows from God’s election, flows out of this inner necessity.

in the being of God, and not merely in a voluntary act of the will. Fourth, my alternative articulates the relationship between theological *loci* in a more satisfactory way than the traditional formulation. The doctrine of *creatio ex electione* explicitly connects creation to christology, soteriology, pneumatology, and eschatology. As a result, the first, second, and third articles of the creed are interrelated in a much clearer manner. Fifth, my proposal would preclude the possibility of natural theology from the very start, something I count as quite beneficial. I submit that these advantages make the post-Barthian concept of *creatio continua ex electione* a serious candidate for being the most fruitful doctrine of creation.