

Augustine of Hippo on *creatio ex nihilo*

Victor Alexandru Pricopi*

Abstract: In the early Christian centuries, there were disputes over the creation of the world. In vogue, following the tradition established by Plato, was the belief that the world was created from a pre-existing matter. In the second century, begins to appear the first Christian authors who adopt the idea of a creation out of nothing. Augustine is part of this tradition, dedicating a series of treatises on the book of *Genesis*. He often writes against the Manicheans and tries to prove that the world was created out of nothing.

Keywords: Augustine, creation, matter, *creatio ex nihilo*, *rationes seminales*

EARLY INTERPRETATIONS OF THE BOOK OF *GENESIS*

The theme of the preexistence of matter precedes Augustine, and can be found in classical philosophy and, also, in Jewish and Christian exegesis of Bible. In order to understand Augustine's position on this subject, it is necessary to make a short overview on the debates on this theme, made by thinkers before Augustine.

The early exegetical works on the first verses of Scripture are concerned, in particular, with the controversy between the “old philosophy” and the Scripture. The “orthodox” theologians and apologists try to refute heretic or pagan perspectives on the pre-existent matter, with which God works as a Platonic demiurge.

The formula *God created the world out of nothing* is already found in *2 Maccabees* 7:28. The theme appears, also, in Hellenistic Judaism and in early Christian thinkers like Aristides. But, in these cases, the formula does not get yet the status of an ontological thesis, in opposition to the Platonic model of world cosmogony. As Gerhard May (2004, 148-163) shows, only with Tatian and Theophilus, *creatio ex nihilo* became an ontological principle. Philo of Alexandria, for example, “did not advocate *creatio ex nihilo* in the later Christian

* Victor Alexandru Pricopi (✉)
Independent Scholar, Roman, Romania
e-mail: pricopi@gmail.com

sense and seems to have found no contradiction between the philosophical model of world-formation and the biblical conception of creation.” (Ibid., 9)

In the second century, some Christians still accept a literal interpretation of the *Timaeus* dialogue. The idea of a divine artisan still remains attractive in the later Christian writings, but the idea of a pre-existing matter is abandoned, because it limits the divine omnipotence and the sovereignty of God.

Returning to the controversy between heretics and orthodox theologians, in the second century we can find the case of Hermogenes. He, as a gnostic, describes God’s creation as a simple way to order the pre-existent unordered matter. He interprets the creation of the world through the lens of the *Timaeus* dialogue, and a testimony of his concepts can be found in Tertullian’s work, *Adversus Hermogenes*. According to the Roman apologist, Hermogenes argues that there are three alternatives regarding creation: God generates everything from himself (Tertullian 1999, II.2); God generates everything from nothing (Ibid., II.4); and God generates everything from a pre-existing matter (Ibid., III.1).

Hermogenes said that the first two options are impossible and the third must be the true one. If the world is generated from God himself, it should be made out of God’s parts, but he doesn’t have any. God cannot generate the cosmos out of nothing, because the existence of evil in the world is a proof in this sense; he could not generate anything evil. Among his arguments in the favor of the existence of a pre-existing matter, Hermogenes invokes *Genesis* 1:2, where it is written that „the earth was without form and void”, which implies, in his view, the existence of an amorphous matter (Ibid., XXIII. 1). He also talks about *Genesis* 1:1, where “in the beginning” must be understood as a pre-existing matter (Ibid., XIX.1). Tertullian writes against all these theses and defends the concept of *creatio ex nihilo*, constructing the first type of this kind of theology in the Latin space.

While the doctrine of creation from nothing was ignored by pagan philosophers and many early Christians, it begins to be embraced by mainstream Christianity, starting with the second century.

GOD AS SUPREME BEING

Augustine’s exegesis on creation does not offer anything radically new. As we have seen, starting with the second century, Christian theologians support the idea of creation from nothing. In addition, in

Augustine's era, this idea becomes a dogma within the Church (Knuuttila 2001, 103).

Augustine of Hippo approaches the issue of creation in many works, but the most significant analysis about cosmology are found in his commentaries on *Genesis* (*De Genesi contra Manichaeos*; *De Genesi ad Litteram imperfectus liber*; *De Genesi ad Litteram-Libri Duodecim*). Also, remarks and investigations are found in the last three books of the *Confessiones*, and in the *De Civitate Dei*, especially in Books 11 and 12.

In his view, the creation out of nothing is, above all, the mark of God Almighty. He also points out that creation out of nothing is a true Christian faith. The Bishop asserts that God made the unformed matter, and he points out that, contrary to other artisans or makers, God needs no help from an exterior and independent matter, out of which he can create world or something else. He would not be omnipotent, if He needed such aid from matter. About all of these, in *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* I.6.10 he writes:

And, therefore, we correctly believe that God made all things from nothing. For, though all formed things were made from this matter, this matter itself was still made from absolutely nothing. For we should not be like those who do not believe that God Almighty could have made something from nothing, when they observe that carpenters or any workmen cannot produce anything unless they have something out of which to make it. (...) But God Almighty did not have to be helped by anything that He had not made, so that He could make what He wanted. For if something that He had not made helped Him to make those things He wanted to make, He was not almighty, and that is sacrilegious to believe.

The same statement can be found also in *De Genesi ad litteram imperfectus liber* I.2: "Here is that faith: God the Father Almighty made and established all of creation through His only-begotten Son (...). Thus all of creation, whether intellectual or corporeal - or, as we can put it more briefly in the words of the divine Scriptures, whether invisible or visible - has been made by God, not out of the nature of God, but out of nothing."

According to Plotinus' theory of emanation, the world proceeds from God, without Him being diminished or being affected. However, for the Greek philosopher, God does not act in a freeway, since such an

act would lead to the conclusion that there is a change inside God. Thus, for Plotinus, world arises from necessity.

On the other hand, Augustine unequivocally affirms the free creation out of nothing. Thus, asserting God's superiority and the total dependence of the world upon Him, because all beings owe their existence to God. This is also stated in a work that does not explicitly address the issue of *Genesis*. In *De libero arbitrio* III.XV.42, he affirms that all things have been done through the supreme and unchangeable Wisdom of God, the only One who really exists in the highest mode.

The creation, the sensible and the spiritual one, is good, and it is the result of the free act of the divine will¹. God, as a perfect entity, being immutable and possessing the other perfect qualities, He gives life to all things, as we can read in *De Civitate Dei* XII.2: "Since God is supreme being, that is, since He supremely *is* and, therefore, is immutable, it follows that He gave 'being' to all that He created out of nothing; not, however, absolute being. To some things He gave more of being and to others less and, in this way, arranged an order of natures in a hierarchy of being."

THE MATTER AND THE ACT OF CREATION

In Augustine's works, creation out of nothing is mentioned for the first time in *Soliloquia* I.1.2. God, the Creator of the universe is the one "by whom all things come into existence which by themselves would not exist (...), who out of nothing didst create this world which the eyes of all perceive to be most beautiful." (Augustine 2006, 23)

For the Latin theologian, the supreme or highest Measure (*modus*) is linked with God, who is the Principle of everything, of all beings, visibles and invisibles. All these beings are good since God has given them measure (*modus*) or the different grades of being, form (*species*) or kind of being, and order (*ordo*) designating the finality of being (Anderson 1965, 69). Also, here we have to note that, for Augustine, "evil could not come out of order, if order began after evil came into being. Order, however, was always with God. As to this non-entity we call evil, it either always was, or it began at some stage. And since order itself is either good or proceeds from good, there was never anything outside order nor will there ever be." (Augustine 2007, II.7.23)

¹ See Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram* I.5.11, II.6.14; *De Civitate Dei* XII.18.

Claudio Moreschini (2005, 441) notes that *modus* is the lowest level of being capable of receiving form and it is the feature of the primordial matter. This matter must have been created precisely because it needed to have at least one *modus* before *form*. Augustine treats extensively in his *Confessiones* the issue of the primordial matter. He reflects on the *Timaeus* dialogue and the issues raised by it. The Bishop of Hippo remembers how he was not able to understand how there could be a formless matter. He projected a different image of it, but, as he writes, that was a huge error.

The primordial matter from which the world was made did not have *species*, it was out of order and without form. *Modus* is present in the unformed matter as limit between being and non-being. Let's take a look on *Confessiones* XII.8.8, in this regard: „But, this whole was almost nothing, since it was still completely formless; yet, it was already something that could be formed. Indeed, Thou, O Lord, didst make the world from formless matter, and this Thou didst make almost nothing and out of nothing, that Thou mightiest make great things from it, at which we, the sons of men, wonder.” So, Augustine refers to *modus* as „manner of being”, linking it with the unformed matter. *Species*, on the other hand, is interchangeable with the Latin *forma*, which represents the Platonic *Idea* (O'Donnell 2012, 47).

In *Confessiones* XII.6.6 Augustine writes about the unformed matter, where it is interpreted as neither nothing nor something, but it is something amid form and nothing. Here are his own words about this subject: “For, I should more easily have agreed that it did not exist at all, a thing deprived of every form, than think of something in between form and nothing, something neither formed nor nothing, an unformed thing which is almost nothing.” So, the unformed matter is something, without certainly being something.

Augustine makes a distinction between an absolutely formless matter and formless by comparison, with more beautiful shapes. The absolutely formless matter is nothingness. The second type of matter, which has the ability to receive form, cannot really be called nothing, because it comes from God. In *Confessiones* XII.6.6, he links this matter with the changing nature of the bodies, and says about matter, since it has the capacity to receive form, that it cannot be identified with nothing.

In *De Vera Religione* (xviii, 36), he writes that not only the possession of form, but even the ability to receive form is good, and what is good cannot be nothing, „all that is formed receives its form

from God, and from Him all that is not yet formed receives power to be formed. Nothing has integrity of nature unless it be whole of its kind. From God comes all wholeness as every good thing comes from Him.” (Augustine 2006, 242) The ability to receive form is the positive aspect of matter through which it can participate to the goodness of God. This matter, which is not nothingness, is God’s own creation, without preceding the things that possess the form, but it is created in the same time with form – we find in *De Genesi ad Litteram* I.15.29 (Augustine 1982). He identifies the unformed matter, which God has created from nothing, with heaven and earth, mentioned in the first verse of *Genesis*².

On the other hand, Augustine says he knows the term *hyle*, used by the Manicheans, but he understands it in a different way. In *De Natura Boni* XVIII, he writes:

By “Hyle” I mean matter completely without form and quality, out of which are formed the qualities we perceive, as the ancients said. Hence wood is called “Hyle” in Greek, because it is suitable material for workmen, not that it makes anything but that something may be made out of it. That “Hyle” is not to be called evil. It has no form by which we can perceive it. Indeed, it can hardly be conceived because it is so utterly without form. But it has the capacity to receive form. If it could not receive the form imposed on it by the artificer it could not be called material either. Now if form is a good thing, so that those who have a superior form are called beautiful [formosi], doubtless even capacity for form is a good thing. Wisdom is a good thing, and no one doubts that capacity for wisdom is also a good thing. And because every good thing comes from God, no one should doubt that matter, if there is such a thing, derives its existence from God alone. (Augustine 2006, 331)

AUGUSTINE ON *RATIONES SEMINALES*

Augustine develops a theory in order to highlight the divine action, namely the theory of the *rationes seminales*, the germs of all beings or things that would be flourished or developed over history and time. *Rationes seminales* are the germs of beings, their invisible or potential powers created by God at the very beginning, and growing into objects of various species through their temporal development. The idea of these potentialities, Frederick Copleston (2003, 76) believes, was found by Augustine in Plotinus’ philosophy.

² See Augustine, *De Genesi ad Litteram* I.14.28, and *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* I.7.11.

All beings, as plants, animals and even man were created in an invisible way, potentially in their *rationes seminales*. In this way, God created all the vegetation, before it grew on earth. We may wonder why Augustine did not feel satisfied with the concept of *seeds*, within its common meaning, with seeds as a product of plants. Copleston states that he has appealed to such a meaning of the term because in *Genesis* 1:12 it is highlighted that the earth gives birth to the green herbs, before it seeds. And this is true to all other living beings created by God. This forced him to resort to another sense of the seed. (Ibid., 77) For example, God has originally created the *ratio seminales* of plants, which at the right time became true plants, which then produced the physical seeds or fruits, in its usual sense (Augustine 1982, V.4.9).

So, according to Augustine, God has embedded in things their *rationes seminales*, and they encompass all potentialities or virtualities, which in the history of the universe will be carried out and fulfilled. In the herb's seeds there are, in an invisible way, all parts that will develop successively out of it. In other words, there are all stages of the plant embedded in the seeds, from the simple seed to the mature tree. In the same way, from the very beginning, all the beings, in their totality, were present in the world under the form of "seeds". The world is like a pregnant woman, it carries in it the things that will come to light in the future:

It is one thing to create and to rule the creature from the innermost and highest pivotal cause of all causation (...), but something quite different to apply some operation from without in accordance with the powers and the faculties which have been granted to each one by Him, so that what has already been created may come forth either now or later, either in this way or that way. The being that thus appears has already been wholly created in the texture as it were of the material elements, but only emerges when the opportunity presents itself. For as mothers are pregnant with unborn offspring, so the world itself is pregnant with the causes of unborn beings, which are not created in it except from that highest essence, where nothing is either born or dies, begins to be or ceases to be. (...) Although such causes are not natural, yet they are applied according to nature, in order that those things which lead a hidden life in the secret womb of nature may break forth and be created outwardly by developing according to their proper measures, numbers, and weights, which they have received in secret from Him, who has ordered all things in measure, number, and weight. (Augustine, *De Trinitate* III.9.16)

The same idea can be found also in *De Civitate Dei* XXII.14:

Actually, we all have at the time of our conception and birth this measure of our maturity assigned to each of us, but it is a potential, not an actual, stature. It is the same with all the parts of our body. They are all present potentially in the seed, although some may still be lacking at the time of birth, as in the case of teeth and the like. There is, in fact, stamped on the seminal principle of every organic body the invisible design, so to speak, of what is yet to be woven and which will appear only as time goes on.

In *Confessiones* XI.4.6, Augustine firmly affirms that heaven and earth were created because they are subject to change and to fickleness. When a thing was not created and it still exists, it has nothing in itself which had not existed before, since the mark of change and fickleness is precisely the fact that something exists without having existed before. In the next chapter, the Bishop of Hippo says that the entire creation comes from the divine word. He asks himself how God created heaven and earth, and which tool He used for such a great work. He says that God cannot have worked like an artist or an artisan, who creates another thing from an already existing material. He does not handle a matter that already exists, such as clay, stone, wood or any other material. God is the one who made the matter as well, because He had nothing in His hands to create heaven and earth, therefor it couldn't be something beyond His existence, God spoke and things were born, with the help of the word He created the entire universe.

A few pages later, in *Confessiones* XI.10.12, Augustine brings into discussion the objections of the Neoplatonic philosophers regarding the dogma of creation, who were asking "What did God do before He made heaven and earth?". They say that if God had a new will, a new motion to ground the world, "is it a true eternity when a will-act, which did not exist, arises". As Étienne Gilson (1949, 264) notes, the world is not eternal and, being created it has a beginning, if not in time, at least with time itself. The creation did not happen in history, but it is the beginning of history.

CONCLUSION

Augustine was almost a decade a Manichaeian, and after that he adopted the Neoplatonic teachings. Until his conversion, he did not cease to support the eternity of matter and its pre-existence. His

thinking is refined according to the school he belonged to. Once he became a Christian, Augustine perceives the matter in a different way, but not in a dualistic one, as a cause of evil in the creation. (Moreschini 2005, 440) First of all, for Augustine, God is omnipotent and He doesn't need something beside Him, as a preexistent matter, in order to create the world. Being Almighty, God Himself creates matter.

Now, the matter is reevaluated, it is something positive, it is God's creation, as we said. In *De Vera Religione* (xviii, 35), he says that everything that exists must have a value, as small as it can possibly be. Thereby, even the smallest good is still good, and it must be from God. The higher the value, the higher the good is. In the same manner, the smallest value is the smallest good. Thus, even if there are things with less good parts, it still belongs to the domain of good and it can only be from God. Let's take a closer look at the invoked text:

Existence as such is good, and supreme existence is the chief good. From what did He make them? Out of nothing, whatever is must have some form! And though it be but a minimal good it will be good and will be of God: The highest form is the highest good, and the lowest form is the lowest good. Every good thing is either God or derived from God. Therefore even the lowest form is of God. And the same may be said of species. (Augustine 2006, 242)

Therefore, for the Bishop of Hippo, the whole creation is good, the matter is good, in its turn, because it is also a creation of God. Augustine, even if he is familiar with the Platonic tradition, he adopts the concept of *creatio ex nihilo*, which was proposed by the second century Apologists. In his works, the thinker follows the already embedded tradition and appeals often to the works of Christian theologians as Origen and Ambrose.

REFERENCES:

- Anderson, James F. 1965. *St. Augustine and Being: A Metaphysical Essay*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Augustine, Saint. 1952. *The City of God, Books VIII-XVI*. Transl. Gerald G. Walsh and Grace Monahan. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press.
- Augustine, Saint. 1953. *Confessions*. Transl. Vernon J. Bourke. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press.
- Augustine, Saint. 1954. *The City of God, Books XVII-XXII*. Transl. Gerald G. Walsh and Daniel J. Honan. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press.
- Augustine, Saint. 1963. *The Trinity*. Transl. Stephen McKenna. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press.

- Augustine, Saint. 1982. *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Volume 1: *Books 1-6*. Translated and annotated by John Hammond Taylor. New York: Paulist Press.
- Augustine, Saint. 1991. *On Genesis*. Two Books *On Genesis against the Manichees* and *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: An Unfinished Book*. Transl. Roland J. Teske. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press.
- Augustine. 2006. *Earlier Writings*. Edited and translated by J. H. S. Burleigh. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Augustine, Saint. 2007. *On Order (De Ordine)*. Translated and introduced by Silvano Borusso. South Bend: St. Augustine's Press.
- Copleston, Frederick. 2003. *History of Philosophy*, Volume 2: *Medieval Philosophy*. London/New York: Continuum.
- Gilson, Étienne. 1949. *Introduction à l'étude de saint Augustin*. Paris: J. Vrin.
- Knuuttila, Simo. 2001. Time and Creation in Augustine. In *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*, eds. Eleonore Stump and Norman Kretzman, 103-115. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- May, Gerhard. 2004. *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of 'Creation out of Nothing' in Early Christian Thought*. London: T&T Clark International.
- Moon, Anthony A. 1955. *The De Natura Boni of Saint Augustine: A Translation with an Introduction and Commentary. A Dissertation*. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America.
- Moreschini, Claudio. 2005. *Storia della filosofia patristica*. Brescia: Morcelliana.
- O'Donnell, James J. 2012. *Augustine: Confessions*, Volume 2: *Commentary on Books 1-7*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stump, Eleonore, and Norman Kretzman (eds.). 2001. *The Cambridge Companion to Augustine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tertullian. *Adversus Hermogenem*. In Tertullien. 1999. *Contre Hermogène*. Transl. Frédéric Chapot. Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf.