

Hope, Evil and *Creatio ex Nihilo*

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The Academy Award-winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* develops its plot around a wildly unlikely episode in the life of a young man from the slums of Mumbai, India. In a seemingly impossible series of coincidences, a young “slumdog” finds himself beneath the spotlight of the Indian version of the game show “Who Wants To Be A Millionaire.” Only eighteen years old and orphaned by interreligious violence, Jamal Malik defies all logic by correctly answering a series of obscure trivia questions. The film flashes back to various episodes in his childhood, including close encounters with death, prostitution, child trafficking, and other wrenching experiences. Most human beings are privy to an assortment of odd and trivial facts, and Jamal’s history seems to have prepared him for the questions presented to him on the show. The organizers of the game show suspect him of cheating. How could a child from the slums know so many obscure facts? During an overnight break in the taping of the show, and just as Jamal nears the staggering prize of twenty million rupees, the producers of the show have him tortured to discover his method of cheating. Jamal has no secrets to unveil; he just happens to know a remarkably unlikely collection of the right facts. An extraordinary and disturbing film, *Slumdog Millionaire* clearly depicts the deep suffering of the slum and how the odds are stacked against slumdogs. The exuberant triumph of Jamal is soaring and heart-warming, even as it is *fictional* and improbable.

Slumdog Millionaire has been widely lauded for its careful and accurate depictions of the suffering that occurs within the cardboard communities of Indian slums. Our theological and philosophical reflections on suffering are worth very little if they must fall silent on the muddy streets of Mumbai. The story of Jamal does more than warm the heart; it stunningly underscores the unlikely nature of his success. In the real world, we cannot help but realize that these sorts of successes rarely, if ever, happen. The odds are overwhelming that slumdogs will stay slumdogs and that rupees will stay in the hands of the rich, far from the poor, the hungry, and the suffering. Nobody makes movies about *real* slumdogs, whose range of reasonable possibilities simply do not include the kind of happy ending required by Hollywood.¹ But the film does show how some people rise above the misery of the slums: by exploiting other slumdogs. To be lord of the slums, one must become adept at exploitation, whether by scams, prostitution, slavery, or violence. There appears to be no honest road out of poverty. Jamal’s story is remarkable because it defies the logic of the possible. This is the stuff of fantasy.

If the slums of Mumbai epitomize our discussion of suffering, we are wise to wonder if there is any *real* hope for slumdogs. For my part, I wish to raise questions about the nature and origin of *hope* for people who suffer. If there is some kind of hope that is relevant for the residents of Mumbai’s slums, from whence does it come? In this essay I will specifically interrogate the role of *time* in the arrival of hope. Does hope come from *within* history? Is hope a product of history? Or does hope for slumdogs arise from beyond history, from before or after the universal structures of sequential time and its possibilities? I will address these questions by considering the theological doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* precisely because the hope for the slums must come “out of nothing.” *Creatio ex nihilo* has received a great deal of attention in recent years, for a variety of reasons. Here I will evaluate this doctrine for the relationship it forges between hope and history. I will suggest that the doctrine of *ex nihilo* is critical as a doctrine of impossible hope. Hope for the slumdog, I will

argue, must arise *ex nihilo*, as an eschatological hope whose ground is otherwise than the brand of hope engendered within being.

John Caputo will serve as a principle interlocutor in the following discussion. In his book *The Weakness of God*, Caputo discusses and dismisses the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* in part because of his concern for the way the unilateral “act” of creation seems too forceful and powerful for the weak God of Caputo’s “event.”ⁱⁱ A God who creates in this fashion, reasons Caputo, is too omnipotent and too external to the world and its events. He instead proposes a “theology of the event” in which God is to be understood as “weak power.” Caputo proposes that we rethink the Christian God outside of the power-driven models that have given rise to patriarchy, hierarchy, and ontological structures which prize muscle and might.

Caputo’s rejection of *creatio ex nihilo* aligns his work with that of Catherine Keller, whose remarkable book *Face of the Deep* attacks this traditional doctrine for similar reasons.ⁱⁱⁱ Caputo and Keller agree that a God of *ex nihilo* is produced by the patriarchal preferences of Western philosophy and that *ex nihilo* remains a doctrine that reinforces divine omnipotence. Still, the partnership between Caputo and Keller seems mostly coincidental. At the surface, both thinkers confidently reject the doctrine for its connections to patriarchy and power-hungry, domineering theologies that prize a God of muscle and might, but beneath the surface lies a set of fundamental, glaring disagreements.

There are at least two distinct ways that theologians and philosophers can take up the question of *creatio ex nihilo*; this doctrine can answer a historical and onto-theological question about origins and primacy, or it can answer a question about God’s relationship to time and being. As an onto-theological puzzle, this doctrine is an adventure in cosmo-archaeology. *Ex nihilo* becomes the trump card for divine dominance, laying claim to the oldest moment in history and the first tick of the universal clock. At times in the history of the doctrine, *ex nihilo* has been used in this fashion, safeguarding God’s high, domineering power and God’s claim to muscle-bound primacy in the messy struggles of being. To the doctrine as offered in this pitch, Keller’s attack on *ex nihilo* and power is stunning and effective. Caputo nods approvingly toward Keller’s deconstruction of this power-hungry version of *ex nihilo* and the way this doctrine can repeat and perpetuate the patriarchal subordination and defeat of the unruly alterity of the feminine other.

Keller traces the questionable moorings in Biblical texts and points to the highly paternal reasoning that led to the adoption and defense of this doctrine within Christian orthodoxy. She points to the disgust for chaos that drove Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, and particularly Augustine in their embrace of this doctrine. *Ex nihilo* defeats “chaotic multiples” providing strong and powerful beginnings to replace the watery, chaotic, and feminine images of a “matrilineal creation.”^{iv} Keller instead argues for the maternal image of creation *from* matter rather than the creation *of* matter.

In the treatments of *ex nihilo* by Keller and Caputo, there is a correlation between the concepts of power and priority. For Keller, the need to be *first* and to create with the raw force of *ex nihilo* is shamed by the realization that these are masculine impulses connected to a fear of dependence and an aversion to the fundamental intimacy of the watery deep. Keller coins the term *tehomophobic* to describe this negative and fearful attitude toward the *tehom* (deep), summarizing her argument against *ex nihilo* in the following formula: “Genesis 1 + omnipotence + ontology = *creatio ex nihilo*.”^v But Keller realizes that not every break in this formula results in a rejection of *ex nihilo*. Karl Barth, she realizes, admits that Genesis 1 does not provide any obvious support for *ex nihilo*,^{vi} yet Barth continues to affirm the traditional doctrine of creation out of nothing for reasons relating to the stark “difference” between God and the world. Barth loathes the *tehom*,

which is worse than “nothing.” The watery deep is, for Barth, an opponent for the “absolute superiority and lordship” of God. For Barth, the deep and chaotic waters are a “monstrous sphere”; they are barren, empty, and “shoreless.”^{vii} And devoid of all creative capacity, the “waters of the deep” must be without inertia, without movement, without hope, without evolution or potential. The deep seethes with sterile hopelessness. All movement in the deep comes from the creative movement about to begin, the movement that begins with the “Spirit of Elohim” hovering over the waters that have neither a past nor a future.^{viii}

For Keller, Barth has escaped from the efforts to establish *ex nihilo* through exegesis, but he remains bound to the logic of omnipotent beginnings and absolute difference. Barth’s “anti-tehom” theology refuses reciprocity, insisting on a “qualitative difference” between God and the world. He rejects contorted readings of Genesis 1 that might verify *ex nihilo* in a historical sense, but he also rejects any notion of a world of chaotic matter that preexists the creative movement of God. This double rejection calls for a “third possibility,” a possibility toward which Barth only gestures.^{ix} How might we think about this third option?

Keller suggests a form of Whiteheadian philosophy, a theology of becoming, as a third way to think about creation. In “process” cosmology, the work of God has no beginning, but it has eternally related to the chaotic material of the deep from time immemorial. The watery God of the *tehom* molds and makes and forms matter into more harmonious and loving configurations, giving way to organisms and creatures and societies, each demonstrating both marks of the God of becoming and the agency of the material. Tehomic theology, as Keller calls it, is a theology of “multidimensional attraction.”^x The universe is self-organizing, for Keller, but God serves to attract and lure chaos toward harmony, hate toward love, brokenness toward healing. Such a configuration solves a number of thorny problems for theology. Keller points out how tehomic theology undermines theologies of power-hungry dominance and patriarchal sexism. Her theology of becoming emphasizes cooperation, coordination, co-creativity, and the intimacy of God who is fundamentally reciprocity and love.

This is a notable and unforgettable contribution to the feminist critique of traditional Christian theology. I share Caputo’s admiration for Keller’s deconstruction of the traditional dependence on the language of power and dominance. In addition, the time has certainly come for theologians to admit what biblical exegetes have long declared: the Bible does not provide overt support for the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Like Barth, we must seek a third way to think about the relationship between God and creation. Barth’s third way looks, for Keller, far too much like the first way of dominance, too much like one-sided “penetration” and masculine tehomophobia. Thus, Keller offers a third way that is thoroughly and unabashedly metaphysical. She proposes a metaphysics of becoming, a way to think about the relationship between God and the world that affirms the goodness of the deep and retains ample room for distance and difference. Keller’s third way elevates the creatures of the deep, certainly including humans, to the level of co-creator and co-redeemer.

There are obvious benefits to Keller’s tehomic theology in the face of evil, suffering, and extreme poverty. She has *something* to say about the slumdogs and their plight. What is an Indian slum if not painful chaos over which the loving, birdlike spirit of Elohim drifts and hovers? Who can look at the pain of the slumdogs and not wonder how a God of love and omnipotence could coexist with this suffering? It is this question, in particular, that draws Caputo to Keller’s work and to her treatment of the doctrine of creation.

Caputo seeks to undermine the moves and motivations of “strong” theology by pointing to a more beneficial and ultimately more Christian way of thinking about God as “weak” power. Caputo orchestrates a multi-faceted critique of patriarchy, hierarchy, and onto-theological structures that prize muscle and might. God

does not bring about the Kingdom of God by shock and awe but by whisper, by the sacred anarchy of a crucified Jesus. Caputo claims that most Christian theology is bipolar, that it gives lip service to weakness and crucifixion but only in a manner that thinly conceals an obsession for power.^{xi} These moves are refreshing in many respects. Caputo's God cannot be pinned down to a past "present," cannot be made another cause among many causes within "being." God as event is evasive, a part of happenings but never quite riveted to that which has happened. The liberation of God from the clutches of onto-theology provides a refreshing opportunity to consider the Christian God outside the Nietzschean struggle for power that dominates being. These are promising moves.

Caputo's alignment with Keller is sensible; his rejection of *ex nihilo* follows the same trajectory as Keller's. The doctrine of creation has, as these thinkers suggest, supported and reinforced power structures and patriarchal oppression. But oddly enough, Caputo does not question, at any point, the "metaphysics of presence" presumed in Keller's metaphysical account of creation and origins. And this puts his discussion of *ex nihilo* at odds with his discussions of time in the later portions of *The Weakness of God*. My concern arises from what appears to be a fundamental incongruence between the philosophy of time that Caputo embraces in the later chapters and his conversations about *creatio ex nihilo* in Part One. This doctrine need not be a doctrine of power and dominance. Whatever the manner in which *creatio ex nihilo* has been abused, it can also be a doctrine of *difference* and a doctrine that permanently undermines the encroachment of the "metaphysics of presence" on theology and philosophy.

The Caputo who writes the second half (Part Two) of *The Weakness of God* thinks of time outside of Aristotle's "eternal now," a noble struggle that underscores Heidegger's early career and remains a vital consideration in the work of Levinas and Derrida. Strong theology prefers the doctrine of the eternal "now," which reduces the alterity of the past and future to the metaphysics of presence. In Part Two, Caputo sides routinely against the metaphysics of presence. But in his discussion of *creatio ex nihilo*, which is a major feature of Part One, he makes surprisingly onto-theological claims.

In siding with Keller, Caputo has found a powerful partner to support his attack on the *ex nihilo* doctrine. But Keller's critique depends directly on an Aristotelian understanding of time and temporal progression. We have strong reason to believe that Keller is doing far more than deconstructing a distorted doctrine. She never considers the doctrine of *ex nihilo* outside an Aristotelian understanding of time. Keller flips the tables on power theology but offers in its place another form of metaphysical theology. We can, I think, be grateful for her deconstruction without embracing the reconstruction of origins she offers. She provides an alternative to Aristotle's "first mover" argument, but she still allows Aristotle's preference for the present to control her reflections on time and becoming. Keller turns to the doctrine of *ex nihilo* with questions about the role of God *in* being. God is a player in the metaphysical game, a feature of the *present*, an aspect of every event. Her questions about origins *presume* a metaphysics of presence; her discussion of the origin of the universe seeks a chronological answer. Time, for Keller, is not ecstatic; the past is not Caputo's "forgiveness," and the future is not Caputo's "impossible."^{xii} These disagreements are not trivial to the discussion of origins or slumdogs.

Given Caputo's stated objectives in *The Weakness of God*, we should not be surprised to find a sympathetic reading of Keller's deconstructive moves, but we may be surprised to find Caputo embracing her blatantly metaphysical answer to the theological question of time. For Keller, God functions as a fixed, limited, and predictable force within being. This domestication of divine time and influence to a function of the *present* seems diametrically opposed to Caputo's dealings with time in the later chapters of *The Weakness of God*. Caputo joins Keller, speaking against *ex nihilo* because it denies the eternity of the "inoriginate desert and

watery deep.”^{xiii} At every past-present-moment, Caputo points out, there must have been a created other to receive God as *gift* and *event*.

My puzzlement arises from this double use of time. One half of *The Weakness of God* treats time in the traditional sense, and the other half decisively undermines such treatments. Caputo deserves a great deal of credit for helping contemporary philosophy understand and incorporate Heidegger’s critique of Aristotelian time. Caputo has worked in several publications to unsettle the metaphysics of presence that thinks of time as a collection of past “nows” and future “nows.” His sometimes-overlooked book *Demythologizing Heidegger* is extraordinarily helpful in this regard. And for the Caputo who writes the second half of *The Weakness of God*, the past is indeed rattled free from the constraining Aristotelian understanding of the eternal “now.”

Emmanuel Levinas, who struggled throughout his career to rethink time in the wake of Heidegger’s critique of Western philosophy, found in the Christian doctrine of *ex nihilo* a stunning articulation of the alterity of God, time, and the other. In *ex nihilo*, claims Levinas, we find a kind of multiplicity that does not yield to totality. Levinas writes, “The great force of the idea of creation such as it was contributed by monotheism is creation *ex nihilo*—not because this represents a work more miraculous than the demiurgic informing of matter, but because the separated and created being is thereby not simply issued forth from [God], but is absolutely other than [God].”^{xiv} For Levinas, this doctrine has played a more important and central role for philosophy and theology, a role that seems to support Caputo’s concern for “natality”: “grateful for being born.”^{xv}

Caputo seems to have sided in the later part of his book with a Levinasian understanding of the past as anarchic and unrecoverable. Keller, for her part, applauds Levinas for embracing a “depth” to the other that is impenetrable and beyond the colonizing reach of the self. But she rejects Levinas’s notion of absolute exteriority because it renders God too different and distinct from the metaphysical milieu of being.^{xvi} This break with Levinasian alterity is a telling point in Keller’s reconstructive efforts. Levinas offers a “face” that has depth beyond the chaotic depths of the mythical and primordial waters. The depth toward which Levinas gestures is too deep for Keller because it is an infinite depth; Levinas’s version of *ex nihilo* takes things too far, allowing the chaotic other to remain uncompromisingly anterior.

Creatio ex nihilo, by accident or by the intention of the church fathers, is a brilliant doctrine inasmuch as it forces *alterity* into the heart of theology and into the heart of the world. An irresolvable difference arises from that which is *being* and that which is *otherwise than being*. This doctrine prevents the creator from merging with the created, the otherness of God from being domesticated into a feature of being. God arises from nowhere, from no-time, as prior to the world in a more ancient sense than any past moment. God summons from a past that is unrecoverable, from a time that cannot be recuperated as a feature of the present.^{xvii} But this recovery is exactly what Keller’s weak theology attempts to perform, or at least to approximate. She wants to recast the primitive past in the onto-theological framework of process metaphysics. This move reduces God to a feature of being and chains the past to an iron calendar of fixed, former, episodic “nows.” *Ex nihilo* insists that God’s call to the world is always “before” the world, always from a time-before-time. This is the way Caputo discusses the past in his later chapters, so it is surprising to find him joining Keller in rejecting *ex nihilo* in order to support an alternative but equally onto-theological speculation concerning the origins of the universe.

Might the call of God, the arrival of the Messiah, arise from a depth deeper than the deeps, from a beyond that defies distance and can only be considered as radically and infinitely distinct from being? This would

make the movements of messianic hope external to the logic of being and its inherent possibilities. In this sense, *ex nihilo* is a doctrine that cares very little about the physics or metaphysics of the early universe, which are explorations of what might have been or what might be. This is not a doctrine about some recoverable past where the moment of creation began. God is continually creating *ex nihilo*, always calling the world from time before time and toward a future that is not a latent feature of the present.

Philosophers should hesitate before giving advice to people who live in slums, but it seems to be of some importance to investigate *where* and *when* slumdogs should focus their hopes. The perilous and chaotic world of the slums and the evil and exploitation that thrives there are not filled with reasons for hope. One may justifiably worry that a film like *Slumdog Millionaire* might engender false hope; Jamal Malik's story, after all, is beyond fantastical. Hope for the slumdogs is hard to find.

In the second half of *The Weakness of God*, Caputo proposes that we think about the suffering of the past, present, and future as anarchically related to the Kingdom of God. "By trusting in God's rule," Caputo tells us, "one breaks the chain of time and frees up the day...tearing up the chain of time, freeing it from the circulation of debts and anxieties, letting the day be a 'gift.'"^{xviii} Hope in the slum must be hope in the defeat of time and its economies. But Keller's hope is a hope *in time* and a hope in a God who is bound to the constraining chain that Caputo's hope "breaks." Hope, for the Caputo who writes the second half of *The Weakness of God*, is for a healing and forgiveness that cannot be inscribed into the metaphysics of the present. For the slumdog, the future is without meaningful "hope." But Caputo follows Levinas, who "shows the way to alter the past...without driving under the influence of the idea of divine omnipotence."^{xix} However, this perspective on time and the past is a poor partner for Keller's rendering of creation's past. Keller's rejection of *ex nihilo* is driven by a desire to contain God's power within the concept of time and its irrevocability, whereas Caputo wants to liberate hope from this "chain." The hope for the slumdogs, for the Caputo who writes the chapter "Forgiven Time," is a hope that this suffering will be forgiven by a future that is not in the cards of the present. The hope is that the present will be forgiven for its evils, remade in a "new creation" that has loosened the rivets of time that bind the poor to their poverty.

Caputo and Keller can share a commitment to living toward this future, this "forgiven time," in which every resource can be directed toward the acts of compassion that God cannot perform. But when Caputo jettisons the doctrine of *ex nihilo*, he is rejecting more than just the patriarchy of power: he is rejecting an understanding of time that supports his hope that time will be forgiven. *Creatio ex nihilo* is a doctrine of priority; the priority of the other, the priority of grace, the priority of God. *Ex nihilo* declares that creation has a "prior," a hope that is older than the clock time that marks normal beginnings and ends. God-as-event is anarchically prior to the world. *Ex nihilo* makes sense not as a doctrine of separation or distinction, and certainly not as the matricide of chaos pointedly identified by Keller.

This is a soteriological doctrine, a doctrine whose purpose is to safeguard the external source of salvation in God. Salvation is not a nostalgia for a lost past, or a hope for some teleological fulfillment of metaphysical progress. Salvation, Caputo tells us, moves from the outside and the before into the present as *gift* and *event*, as the arrival of a future that is related only impossibly to the present and to the past. It would seem that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* resists the domestication of the divine alterity that reaches the world from the depths beyond deep. *Ex nihilo* situates God externally, undermining and crippling efforts to fold God into being as a being. As such, *ex nihilo* is about God *as event*. To hope in the slums is to hope in a "happening" that defies the logic of the present, that reaches back to a hope that is both older and newer than any that the present can produce. The hope for *real* Jamals of Mumbai is not a hope that things will gradually get

moderately better but that the miracle of *forgiven* time will irrupt even in the midst of the slum. This is a foolish hope, to be sure, but it does appear that Caputo has caught wind of this hope and appropriately named it *Christian*.

Notes

ⁱ The film is loosely based on a novel by Indian author Vikas Swarup, *Q & A* (India: Black Swan, 2005). The novel was itself loosely inspired by some historical events, none of them nearly as unlikely as the events depicted in the film.

ⁱⁱ John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 75-83.

ⁱⁱⁱ Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

^{iv} Keller, 53.

^v Keller, 64.

^{vi} Keller, 84.

^{vii} Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Volume 3, Part 1: The Doctrine of Creation* (T&T Clarke: London and New York, 1958), 107.

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Barth, 104. Keller discusses these themes in *Face of the Deep*, pages 84 and 99, among other places.

^x Keller, 196.

^{xi} Caputo writes, "...theology is bipolar—beneath all its talk about weakness it conceals a love for power..." *Weakness of God*, 15.

^{xii} Caputo's fifth chapter is even named "The Poetics of the Impossible," 101-112.

^{xiii} Caputo, 85.

^{xiv} Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 63. I have edited Levinas's text for the sake of gender inclusion.

^{xv} Caputo, 65.

^{xvi} Keller, 242: "While I cannot appropriate Levinas' own insistence upon the exteriority of the Other as infinitely Other—which leads him to his own postulation of the ex nihilo dogma—nor his accompanying anthropocentrism, I will similarly argue for a depth not found already in a contained 'within' the subject. Nor, however, will it be contained in a relation of 'absolute exteriority.'"

^{xvii} Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1981), 14: "To the diachronic past, which cannot be recuperated by the representation effected by memory or history, that is, incommensurable with the present, corresponds or answers the unassumable passivity of the self."

^{xviii} Caputo, 175.

^{xix} Ibid., 196.