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Autor: Panikkar, Raymond
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Creation and Nothingness

Creation: ex nihilo sed non in nihilum. Nothingness: ad quem sed non a quo

Et substantia mea tamquam nihilum ante te, Ps. 38 (39), 61

Paul Tillich declared near the end of his life that he would like to have re-written his entire theology after his encounter with Japan. Fortunately the same does not apply to Fritz Buri. It seems fitting to dedicate this meditation on one of the central pivots of the western world to a friend who has taken his christian tradition, his contemporary calling and the traditions of Japan so seriously.

My long dedication to problems of creation² and of nothingness³ have led me to entertain the intriguing suspicion which I would like to submit here as a tentative working-hypothesis for understanding the *contemporary concern with nothingness* among a good number of thinkers in the western world⁴. This hypothesis comes out of cross-cultural studies and could be characterized as a sub-product of such an approach, for I do not deal here with an inter-cultural issue, but with an intra-cultural problem within the western horizon.

In comparing the different philosophical schemes throughout the history of human thought concerning the problem, which in western languages may be called the problem of creation, one is struck by the underlying and deep continuity between the *Jewish-Christian-Islamic* tenet of “*creatio ex nihilo*” and the central position that nothingness occupies in a representative segment of contemporary western thought. This idea is reinforced when the contemporary idea of nothingness is compared with parallel notions in *Indian and Japanese* thought. They arise from different horizons.

If I had written this paper in German, I might have entitled it: “Werden und Vergehen. Die Bipolarität des Abendlandes”. If I had followed my own inclinations in English, I would have written: “Be-Coming and Coming to Naught. The Two Poles of Western Culture”, because I think of the Exit from and Entry to Nothingness as one of the cultural invariants of the three millenia of western culture, which speaks for the dynamism of the once mediterranean and now atlantic world. “Creación y anonadamiento”, in the ambivalence of the verbal and nominal forms, is probably what I have in mind: “Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose”. This seemingly purposeless display of languages bears the serious intent of centering my topic. It is important to detect the unbroken Leitmotif in the evolution of western thought before

¹ Vulgate text. The New Latin version says: “Et vita mea quasi nihil est coram te”, and the New Engl. Bible: “And my whole life is nothing in thy sight”. The LXX says: καὶ hypóstasis mou hōseì oudèn enōpión sou.

² Cf. R. Panikkar, *La creación en la metafísica india* (with a selection of texts): *Misterio y Revelación. Hinduismo y Cristianismo: Encuentro de dos culturas* (1971), pp. 83–109; *El concepto de naturaleza* (1972), pp. 102–135. I have had a manuscript on *The Idea of Creation: Indian and Christian* nearly finished since 1957, and still hope to revise and publish it.

³ Cf. R. Panikkar, *El silencio del Dios* (1970), *passim*; *Sūnyatā and Plērōma. The Buddhist and Christian Response to the Human Predicament: Religion and the Humanizing of Man*, ed. J. M. Robinson (1972), pp. 67–86.

⁴ I have in mind not only thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre, Zubiri, etc., but also philosophers like Carnap, Bergson, Blondel, etc. Non-western authors – the japanese Nishida, K., Hisamatsu, Sh., Takeuchi, Y., etc. – are left out of consideration here, except in the last part of this paper.

sailing the Four Seas. One of the threads of this western trait is the subject matter of this paper.⁵

1.

The submitted hypothesis is this: The *modern*, mainly continental European notion of *nothingness* is a secularised and *inverted* idea of the theological dogma of *creation* out of nothing. The pre-temporal theological notion of nothingness at the very source of being is converted into the post-temporal philosophical notion of nothingness at the very end of existence. The *ontological* nothingness as the horizon of created beings is here converted into an *anthropological* nothingness. Theological nothingness stands as the guaranty for growth and development of contingent being in the same way that philosophical nothingness stands as the guaranty for freedom and responsibility of the individual. In other terms: there is a common structure in the entire western civilization beginning with Parmenides and the Greek philosophy, passing through the Christian confrontation with the Hellenic “forma mentis” and finishing in the very reversal of the same pattern in modernity. In short: modern secularized thought is as sacred as traditional religious thought. Theology has re-entered Philosophy through the back door.

Absolute nothingness is unthinkable in both systems of thought. It is related either to a supreme being – to God – in the one case, or to existence – to Man – in the second.

Nothingness stands, in both instances, for risk, contingency, change. Nothingness is what makes the creature creature and different from God; it gives the peculiar stand to the “ek-sistentia” of all creatures, standing between God and nothing.⁶ Nothingness is what makes it possible to transcend being, it makes negation itself possible (and not the contrary).⁷

Furthermore, the horizon of nothingness can only be discovered by a special awareness once the tenet of creation has been accepted.⁸ This is what makes the great distinction between mere philosophy and theological philosophy.⁹ This same horizon of nothingness is discovered not by a “normal” functioning of the human reason, but is revealed to Man by his existential anxiety. And again this is what makes the great distinction between a merely essential thinking and the existential

⁵ It should go without saying that I am not touching upon the formidable substantive issues of creation and nothingness but exclusively upon the *and* that relates them.

⁶ Significantly enough this idea is common not only among the scholastics but is also explicitly defended by Descartes (“Je suis comme un milieu entre l’être et le néant”). One could relate this traditional idea with Heidegger’s assertion: “Die ontologische Differenz ist das Nicht zwischen Seiendem und Sein.” St. Augustine says of that difference: “nec omnino esse, nec omnino non esse.”

⁷ This, as is known, is a thesis common to Heidegger and Sartre.

⁸ X. Zubiri has developed the Christian “horizonte de nihilidad” over against that of the “caducidad” of the Greeks, although the Christian horizon seems to me to be one of creatureliness, i.e. an in-between, ek-sistentia between God and Nothing. Cf. the vedāntic dictum of māyā or this world as sadāsatanirvacanīya, an indefinable between being and nothingness.

⁹ It is sufficient to recall the prolific discussion around the notion of “Christian philosophy” before the Second World War.

philosophical attitude.¹⁰ What revelation or faith does in one case, to let us discover our nothingness, death or dread does in the other.

Nor is this all. To “create” is a transitive verb in the theology of the semitic religions. God creates precisely because he acts out of nothing, and creation (“passive sumpta”) is the result of this act (of creation). Modern philosophical languages introduce the same kind of transitive verb for the opposite act, forcing grammar when necessary.¹¹ If it is God who creates, it is Man who “nothings”, it is nothingness which is being “annihilated”.¹² Man “decreates” precisely because he reduces things to nothing, or rather Man is he by whom nothingness comes into this world.¹³

I could proceed further and give more details and coincidences, but there is no need to repeat what any student of western philosophy and theology knows. I may instead offer some brief considerations of a morphological nature, relevant, in my opinion, to the enterprise of philosophizing in a world-wide context. Is this not what Fritz Buri is striving for?

2.

The first caution to be observed is that the context of the speculation about nothingness in the *Indian* and *Buddhist* world is *different* from that in the western world. Not only is the primordial stage in the oriental myths one of neither Being nor Non-Being, as the Rig Veda would say, but also the apophatic dimension of reality is constitutive and is perhaps its only positive feature. The real is invisible unless enlightenment illumines it. That is why, for instance, freedom will be seen as freedom-from rather than as freedom-for: as liberation rather than liberty. Any comparative study regarding this problem in the context of an East-West dialogue should not forget the radically opposed contexts of both traditions. The point of contact between the East and the West is neither Plato nor Aristotle but the pre-Socratics. The empirical, i.e., that which is given to the *empeiría* (“pace initio metaphysicorum”), that which is really experienced, viz., proven, gone through (as the very etymology suggests), is not that given to the senses but that which transcends them. The given is not the object (the objects disclosed to us by the senses), but the subject (the subjects, disclosed to us by an inversion of the flow to the exterior, as the Upanishads would say). The “e-vident” is not what we see (in front of us, what comes on the way: the ob-vious) but the seer, what sees: the seeing. Suffice here this word of warning.¹⁴

¹⁰ Cf. the now classic places in Heidegger to substantiate this view.

¹¹ The neologisms of “nichten” in German and “néantiser” in French are well-known. Spanish does not need to introduce a new term because it has the transitive verb “anonadar” (and the astonishing word “anonadamiento”) which is not exactly equivalent to the Italian “nullificare” from the medieval Latin. The Romance languages also have derivatives from the medieval Latin “annullare” from “annihilare”. English has to “annul”, “nullify” and “annihilate”.

¹² Cf. the well-known Sartrean expression: “Le néant ne se néantise pas, il est néantisé.”

¹³ Cf. again the Sartrean dictum: “L’homme est l’être par qui le néant vient au monde.”

¹⁴ Cf. the rather unfortunate discussions regarding whether oriental religions are “world-denying” in confrontation with the “world-affirming” semitic ones. It is gratuitously assumed that world equals reality, that “reality” is empirical and that experience means sensation.

Is it not also true that the contemporary speculation on nothingness would be foreign to the Hellenic mind? The primordial chaos is not nothingness, nor is the demiurge a creator out of nothing. It is the Semitic impact and more specifically the Christian speculation that sounds a new tune here. Time is finite and has an a-temporal beginning. It touches nothingness. Nothingness in the modern sense is a Christian or perhaps a post-Christian theologumenon. From the eastern perspective not only “*ex nihilo nihil fit*” but also “*nihil in nihilo cadit*”. Is this not the law of *karma*?

Thirdly and finally, we detect the following scheme of thought in both cases: there is *Man*. Where does he *come* from? Where does he *go*? What makes him what he is? How are we to know it? The one series of questions tries to direct us to Man’s source and origins, to the primordial nothingness out of which he emerged by an act of creation. The other tries to direct us in the opposite direction, to Man’s end and final stage, to death, to disappearance. The deontologization of Man is reached in his origin in the one instance,¹⁵ and in the other, in his final stage.¹⁶ Either at the beginning or at the end, “nothingness haunts being”.¹⁷ But the scheme of intelligibility and a certain type of formal presupposition are the same. The time factor, regarding the past in the first case, or looking toward the future in the second, is central in both cases.

The non-acceptance of the precarious human condition is also patent in both attitudes. In one case Man is “consoled” because he has come out of nothing and thus all that he has is a pure gift for which he has to be thankful. Humility is the truth and thankfulness the basic human attitude. Prayer (from “*precarius*”) is his way toward fulness. In the other case Man is also “comforted” because he has a heroic and noble destiny, that of facing death, of encountering nothingness, of overcoming dreams of unreality and escapism and thus being confronted with the irrepeatability and earnestness of the present. Authenticity and the courage to be or not to be are the basic values here. Refusing to pray (beg) but confronting precariousness (Man’s questioning nature) is his way toward the exit. Time is the most sacred category. Nothingness is in both cases the ultimate “stuff” of Man: either at the beginning or at the end.

The time-bias is visible in both cases and by the same token is the difference between them. Whereas the past, the origins, the primitive revelation, the “beginning” has the primacy in the one case, in the other, the future, the end, the final eschatology has the main role to play in human life. It is this temporal interpretation of creation which crept slowly into the late medieval mind, that in my opinion is at the root of the pendular reaction of modernity. Thomas Aquinas held that reason cannot prove creation as a temporal event and by this very token affirmed

¹⁵ The creature “*sibi autem relictum in se considerata nihil est*” say Thomas Aquinas, echoing the entire Christian tradition.

¹⁶ “*Sein zum Tode*” either in the Heideggerian sense or in a different tone is also an expression of our nothingness at the end.

¹⁷ This is again a direct quotation of Sartre’s *L’Être et le Néant*: “*Le néant est postérieur à l’être... il hante l’être.*”

that it is irrelevant, because the real creation is the total, constant and constitutive dependence of all beings on Being. This crystallized in the well-known formula that “creatio” and “conservatio” are only different “quoad nos”. And in fact if the human mind could find some fundamental and real difference between them, it could easily prove that creation had a beginning, for creatures then would need more than the act of God that sustains their existence in order to come to be. This idea has so surreptitiously entered the popular Christian mind that the present-day fuss between “creationists” and “evolutionists” misses the point altogether if it is a question of discussing a Christian tenet and not an autonomous scientific hypothesis. Now, the moment that creation is located at a certain moment in time (against Augustine and Thomas) the arché, principium, foundation, ground becomes beginning and thus calls for an end. (And those who unduly extrapolate the second principle of thermodynamics are made happy.) If human souls, in popular Christian belief, have beginnings and no end, all the elements are given for the inversion of the entire process, situating the zero point at the end: the modern nothingness. And the “nihil omnino in nihilum redigetur”¹⁸ of Scholasticism becomes “the defiant courage to embrace nothingness”.¹⁹ When time becomes menacingly short in the experience of Man because he has nothing else but a linear temporality, Modernity begins.

3.

I am not saying that the existentialistic notion of nothingness is merely the inverse of the mainly Christian idea of creation. I am not affirming that traditional Christian thought was only obsessed by the past and the origin, whereas modern existentialistic thought is worried only about the future and the end. This would be an oversimplification of the whole matter.

I am trying to discover a certain trend of mind, a pattern of thought which *connects* these two seemingly divergent world-views. I am further suggesting that a critical approach from both sides could be elaborated if this hypothesis could be used. I am also submitting that their complementarity may help us to enter into *dialogue* with other types of human experience and proceed a further step in the right direction toward a more comprehensive human wisdom. I am saying that these two apparently dialectically opposed views of reality are in fact two species of the same genus, and that one of the advantages of a cross-cultural approach is to help us to find out commonalities where one is accustomed to suffer only incompatibilities. In other words, what may appear as a “casus belli” from the opposite shores of the Rhine, may become a common front if seen from the banks of the Ganges. If this hypothesis is correct, we may draw still a couple of general considerations.

The first is that zero is not an historical category just as in mathematics zero is not a number. In other words, history never begins at zero and the human tradition can never present a radical newness or offer an absolute beginning. We cannot

¹⁸ And yet God, but only he, can “aliquid in nihilum redigere”.

¹⁹ In the English translation of Buri's words describing modern nihilism.

jump over our own shadow, or totally break away from tradition. There is a deep continuity in human history and culture. The “apostolic continuity”, to use a transposed theological term, is not so easily broken. Man’s own ancestors cannot be denied. Out of Europe or America there cannot come anything which is not influenced by and related to the past history of those continents. The Semitic impact, as well as many others of course, has entered into the blood of that part of the world. There can be in the West an anti-Christian and also a post-Christian culture, but not an a-Christian one for the few centuries to come.²⁰

The methodological translation of this idea amounts to the need for incorporating the context of any text in order to understand the latter. In other words, the historical perspective is indispensable for the understanding of any cultural phenomenon.

In our particular case we discover, first, that the Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* is not an absolute Christian dogma, but a formulation in dialogue and confrontation with the Hellenic and especially Platonic *dēmiourgós* who shapes and forms the *kosmos* out of the chaos of “primal matter”. The biblical doctrine would say that the creator brings the world into existence “without a previous primal matter”, i.e., not out of the *prôtē hýlē*, but “out of nothing”. To have taken this idea out of context is at the source of more than one misunderstanding.

Similarly, in the second place, we situate the modern western conceptions of nothingness within the Christian context with which they are in dialogue and confrontation. That is why they are neither absolute statements regarding “Being and Nothingness” nor can they be related to their homologues in other traditions without carrying along the Christian context that situates them.

This first point should lead us directly to a second equally important consideration, namely the particularity of any given human tradition: no one of them can represent the whole of Man’s experience. This warning against any kind of imperialistic or colonialistic attitude is the more urgent as we have to counterbalance two of the most deeply rooted features of our own mind: that of having a tendency to universalization and that of being unaware of our own presuppositions.

It is here that the “*dialogical dialogue*”, proper to the encounter of cultures, becomes more than just a specialization of some few spirits or a *luxus* for an elite. It is the method now necessary for all our human assertions when they claim to have universal validity.

Three notions may here be briefly recalled. – First, the concept of *corrective*: It is only from another cultural background and a different context that we can detect implicit assumptions and proceed to a critical appraisal of what a certain theory is propounding. – Second, the concept of *complementarity*: The vision from another radically different perspective will offer us a complementary solution to a more universal state of affairs, which first becomes a problem by the very interaction of the two perspectives. – Third, the *inadequacy* of the synthesis thus achieved: If there is no zero in human history, there is no “infinite” either. There is no final product, no end, no consummated eschatology, no absolute position.

²⁰ Cf. the well-known dictum of K. Jaspers: “Wir Abendländer alle sind Christen.”

I may be allowed to elaborate on these three points.

As a *corrective*, the study of the modern western problem of nothingness from another perspective, say the Buddhist one, may help us to discover the proper context within which that particular problem is meaningful. Just as the Christian theological assertion of creation out of nothing is only meaningful if by "nothing" is meant a denial of the "primal matter" of the Greek cosmologies, similarly the modern idea of nothingness can be properly situated if, first, its relations with theories of creation are kept in mind and secondly, if both of these concepts of nothingness are interpreted over against the background of another horizon such as the Buddhist one. Buddhist nothingness (if such an expression be allowed) is neither the primordial non-existence of the created being nor the negation of existence, though obviously it is not totally unrelated to these two insights.

The Buddhist insight *complements* those other intuitions. It situates the notion of nothingness neither in a pre-temporal nor in a post-temporal way. It focuses the problem, furthermore, from another perspective than that of creation or no creation without the need for a revelation. It assumes that the realm of being is co-extensive with that of thinking (without the need of identifying them) and thus that the apophatism of nothingness is not only epistemic and ontic but also ontologic and thus that there is need to speak, even negatively, only for the curious and not yet enlightened person. Nothingness here is not only unthinkable, it is also unthought: we think no-thing, and we do not think when we (think that we) "think" nothingness.

Seeing, on the other hand, the Buddhist perspective (including the claim of having overcome all perspectives of certain Buddhist systems) under the western light one easily discovers that it also assumes that "there is" a certain ineffable meta-ontologic structure, even beyond reality (if this is not playing with words). But this is only one of the possible options of the human spirit. In other words, the *inadequacy* of both perspectives appears clearly when correctly confronted on the same level of discourse or of experience, and yet nothing is said against their being true or untrue. It brings clearly to our eyes that the finitude of our factual situation allows us to make meaningful statements with the inbuilt claim to truth, but does not permit us to raise this truth to the status of an absolute truth.

*

I have been speaking of the Western world, the Judeo-Christian and the modern; and although I have once mentioned the Islamic, I have not made more explicit reference to it. Let me then conclude with a quotation from the sufi Hasan of Basra. He says, in that coalescence of "Dichten und Denken", all that I have been trying to say regarding the "a quo" and "ad quem":

A child was carrying a candle. I asked: "Whence comes that light?"
He blew it out and said: "Now tell me where it has gone!"

Raymond Panikkar, Santa Barbara, California