

2001

Review of *Creatio ex nihilo and the Theology of St. Augustine: The Anti-Manichaeian Polemic and Beyond*,
by N. Joseph Torchia

Catherine Conybeare
Bryn Mawr College, cconybea@brynmawr.edu

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.brynmawr.edu/classics_pubs

Custom Citation

Conybeare, Catherine. Review of *Creatio ex nihilo and the Theology of St. Augustine: The Anti-Manichaeian Polemic and Beyond*, by N. Joseph Torchia. *Church History* 70, no. 4 (2001): 777-778.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. http://repository.brynmawr.edu/classics_pubs/85

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Christian world, but for anyone interested in the construction and representation of "holiness."

Megan McLaughlin

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Creatio ex nihilo and the Theology of St. Augustine: The Anti-Manichaean Polemic and Beyond. By N. Joseph Torchia, O. P. American University Studies Series 7 (Theology and Religion). Vol. 205. New York: Peter Lang, 1999. xxvii + 279 pp. \$49.95 cloth.

What is the exact role of the copula in the main title of Torchia's work? Does the "and" indicate mere juxtaposition, or some closer connection between *creatio ex nihilo* and Augustine's theology? This may seem a frivolous question; but it captures, I think, a fundamental problem in the conception of this book.

I at first took the title to indicate that Augustine's theology of creation was to be discussed in relation to, and as a product of, earlier thinking on the subject (especially given that the sub-title clearly refers to the development of Augustine's own thought): the "closer connection" version of the copula. But Torchia spends over sixty pages of this book—a quarter of his total text—on an introduction which, as he notes, could very well "stand on its own as a concise history of the development of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* from the first through the fifth centuries" (xv). It could indeed: the various strands of this complicated tradition are laid out with admirable clarity, and the chapter could readily be recommended as a handy survey of the topic. However, the sources mentioned are almost entirely Greek. It is highly unlikely that Augustine read Greek well enough to encounter these ideas at first hand, and there is no serious discussion of the issue here (Torchia contenting himself with such observations as that "Augustine had a rich patristic heritage at his disposal" [37–38]). Material that might have had a direct influence on Augustine is either underplayed (as with the discussion of Ambrose's *Hexameron* homilies [19–21], which pushes into a footnote the crucial question of whether they were delivered in a year when Augustine would actually have been at Milan to hear them), or omitted altogether. For example, we have much discussion of Plato's *Timaeus* and its reception, but Cicero's translation of the work is not mentioned—even though that must surely be where Augustine encountered the ideas. Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*, which we know Augustine knew well, is another conspicuous omission. Cicero's influence is alluded to only in a couple of sentences (36); the possible influence of Lactantius, for example, is not mentioned at all. (What about *Inst.* 2.8.10, for example, and the image—which Augustine uses several times—of the *faber*?)

What, then, of the remaining three-quarters of Torchia's work? The final chapter and the epilogue lay out, again very lucidly, the "broader theological implications" (231) of the teachings on creation that Augustine formulated in response to the Manichees. This leaves us with six central chapters, which deal directly with Torchia's subtitle, "the anti-Manichaean polemic." The first of these takes the important step of laying out the Manichaean cosmogony against which Augustine was presumably reacting. Here and elsewhere, Torchia usefully contrasts the essential pessimism of the Manichaean worldview with Augustine's determined optimism about the world and the flesh—a basic refusal to repudiate them, which he developed his theology of

creation, *inter alia*, to capture. But the chapter is marred by two things. First, Torchia shows a remarkable naïvety with regard to his sources, choosing to base his outline on Manichaean sources from the eighth and tenth centuries, in Syriac and Arabic respectively. (For his justification of this choice, see 80–81.) Yet there are far earlier sources available, of which the citations in Augustine’s own work are not the least—though they would, obviously, have to be read with a circumspect alertness to their polemical context. Second, the picture of Manichaean cosmogony we glean from this chapter is so contorted and absurd that it is hard to see why Augustine would ever have taken it seriously—and the question of how he could have done so, though crucial to the point at issue, is never addressed.

These reservations notwithstanding, we return in chapters 2–5 (with a reprise of salient points in chapter 6) to what Torchia does best: a clear marshalling of salient passages from his sources. Thus we move swiftly through Augustine’s various commentaries on Genesis (*Contra Manichaeos*, *Imperfectus*, *Ad Litteram*, and *Confessiones* XI–XIII), the *Contra epistolam Manichaei quam uocant Fundamenti*, the *De Natura Boni*, and the *Contra Faustum*. Throughout this section, major themes are established and reiterated: Augustinian optimism against Manichaean pessimism; Augustine’s determination to assert the priority and omnipotence of God against the challenged and defensive God of the Manichees; Augustine’s sophisticated use of language, and especially his interpretation of nothingness (a problem in the Western tradition at least since Parmenides in the fifth century B.C.E.) as exactly that, a simple non-existence upon which nothing can be predicated, and not the terrible moral obscurity of Manichaean dualism. But again, Torchia’s treatment of his sources militates against a deeper development of his—or Augustine’s—ideas. His notes are swollen (usually almost doubling the length of a given chapter) by giving in their original language the passages translated in the main text; and yet there is almost no close reading of these passages to lend subtlety to his treatment. (In one place—211 n. 24—we simply have a string of references listed, despite the fact that the concept being elucidated is the extremely slippery and significant one of “purely fictitious realities.”) Moreover, the citation and translation are, troublingly, often mismatched (e.g. 167 n. 5, 179 n. 67, 199 n. 30; there are also places [150, 246] where the Latin title of a work is given incorrectly). It is hard not to feel that Torchia would have been better off cutting these vast quotations out of the notes and instead taking some space to give proper details of his primary sources in his bibliography: it is unhelpful simply to list all the volume numbers of CCL, CSEL or PL that contain works of Augustine, rather than listing by individual titles, with editors and page or column numbers where applicable. This is, then, an extremely useful survey of ideas about *creatio ex nihilo* juxtaposed with an oddly cursory examination of those ideas in Augustine’s writings. The function of the copula in Torchia’s title is, alas, more disjunctive than associative.

Catherine Conybeare
University of Manchester

The Memory of the Eyes: Pilgrims to Living Saints in Christian Late Antiquity. By Georgia Frank. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000. xiv + 219 pp. \$40.00 cloth.