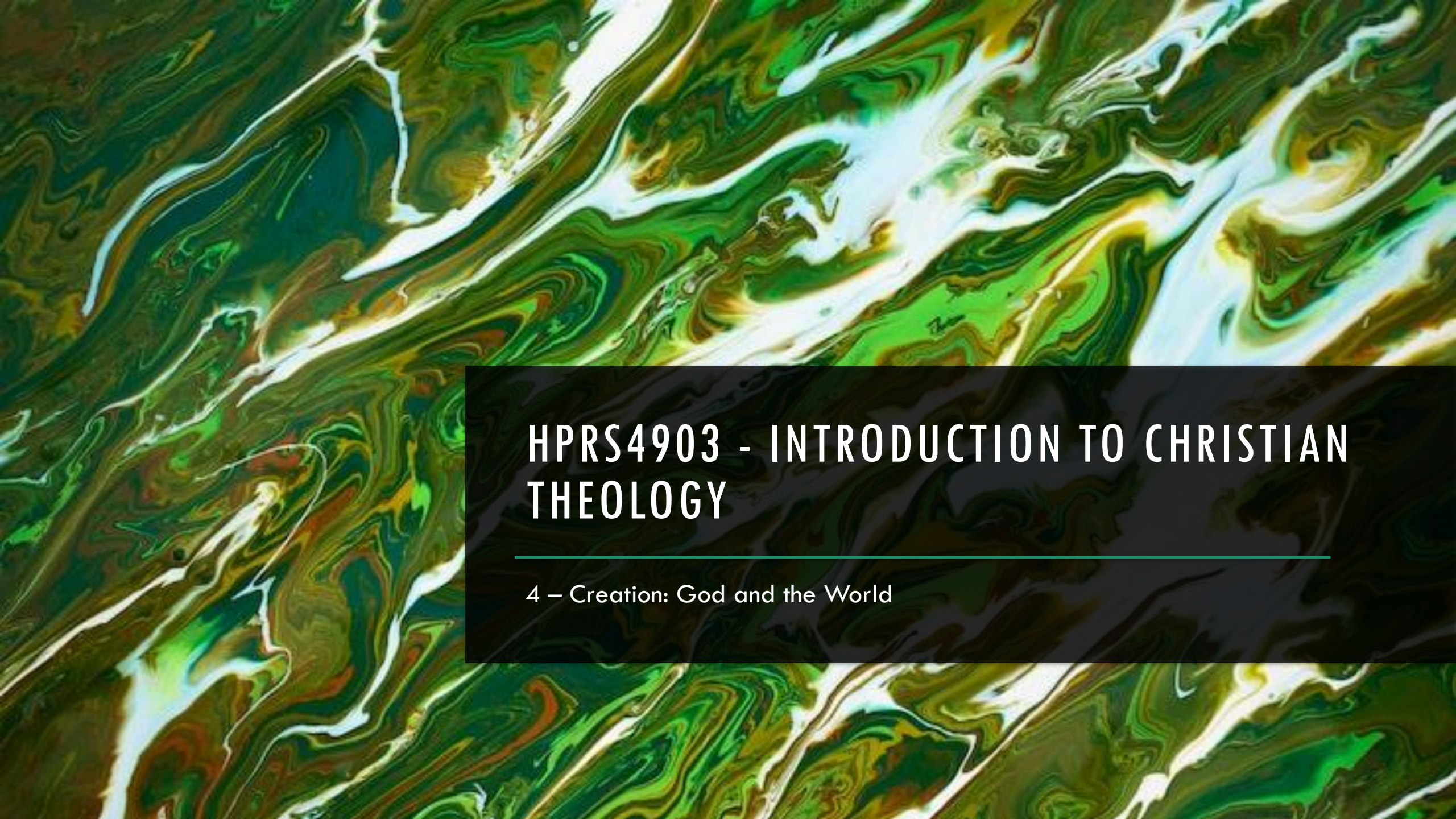




HPRS4903 - INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

4 – Creation: God and the World



CREATION: GOD AND THE WORLD

CREATION: GOD AND THE WORLD

Christian theology begins not with humanity's search for God, but with God's gift of a world.

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1).

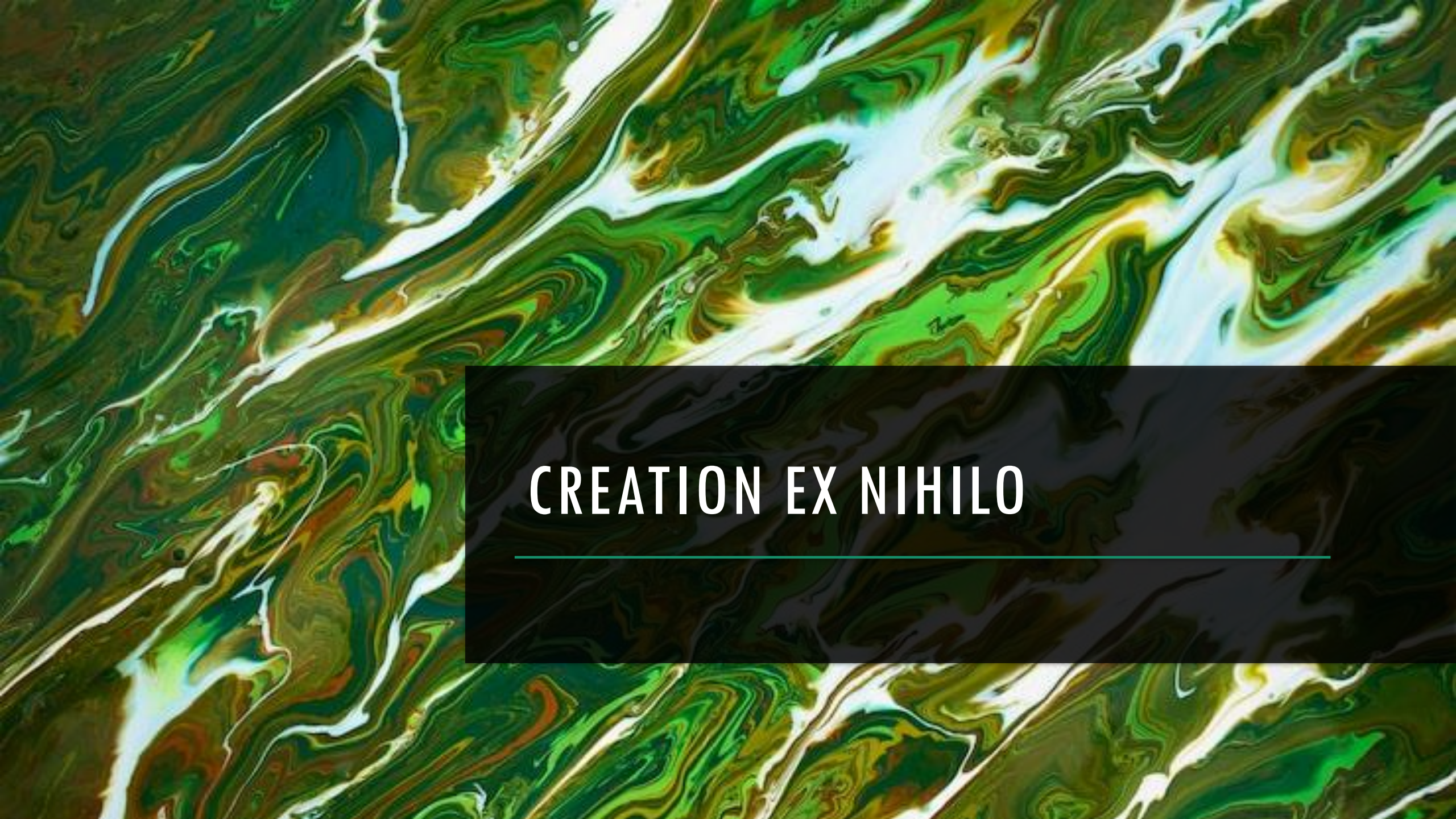
This opening line of Scripture situates all that exists within a relationship of dependence and meaning. Creation is not an afterthought in Christian belief but is instead a foundational characteristic.

To speak of God is already to speak of the world, and to speak of the world is to speak of God's ongoing generosity.

CREATION: GOD AND THE WORLD

Therefore, the doctrine of creation shapes how Christians understand reality itself. It affirms that the universe is not eternal, not self-explanatory, and not the product of blind necessity. It exists because God freely wills it to be. Creation is therefore gift rather than accident, and the world is meaningful rather than indifferent. Human beings, as part of this created order, are neither divine nor disposable. They belong within a cosmos that is good, fragile, and sustained by God.

This lecture explores three interrelated themes: the Christian doctrine of *creation ex nihilo* (“out of nothing”); the creation of humanity in the *image of God* (*imago Dei*); and the ethical and environmental implications of these beliefs. Together, these doctrines shape a distinctive Christian vision of the world and of human responsibility within it.



CREATION EX NIHILO



CREATION EX NIHILO

The phrase *creation ex nihilo* does not appear in the Bible, yet it expresses a conviction that has become very central to Christian theology:

God creates the world “out of nothing.”

This does not mean that God works with literal emptiness as a material, rather, it affirms that nothing exists prior to or independently of God.

Creation is not fashioned from some pre-existing cosmic substance, instead everything that is owes its existence entirely to God.



CREATION EX NIHILO

The opening chapters of Genesis do not explicitly state that God creates from nothing. Instead, Genesis 1 portrays God ordering chaos by divine speech: “Let there be light.”

This is quite different from most Ancient Near Eastern creation stories that often imagined the world emerging from conflict among gods or shaped from pre-existent matter.

Against these myths, the biblical narrative insists that creation is peaceful, purposeful, and good and the world arises not from violence but from the word.



CREATION EX NIHILO

As Christian theology developed, especially in later dialogue with Greek philosophy, it became important to clarify that God is not merely a craftsman shaping eternal matter — why?

If matter were eternal, God would not be the ultimate source of all that exists.

Therefore, the doctrine of Creation *ex nihilo* safeguards divine power and freedom. Importantly, God does not need the world and creation is not an act of necessity but an act of grace.



CREATION EX NIHILO

This distinguishes Christian cosmology — the explanation for the universe — from many others that we might be familiar with.

in Plato's *Timaeus*, a divine craftsman orders pre-existing chaos;

in Aristotle, the world is eternal;

in the Zoroastrian tradition, the universe is the result of the conflict between light and dark;

in some modern scientific accounts, the universe emerges from impersonal physical processes;

in others, the universe goes through cyclical expansions and contractions.



CREATION EX NIHILO

Creation *ex nihilo* is therefore quite a radical idea.

The world might not have been, and its existence is not inevitable. The universe is not ours by right, it is given to us.

It also means that God is not part of the world and that God does not belong to the same category as creatures. God is not “inside” the universe as one object among others, but is instead the source of its being.

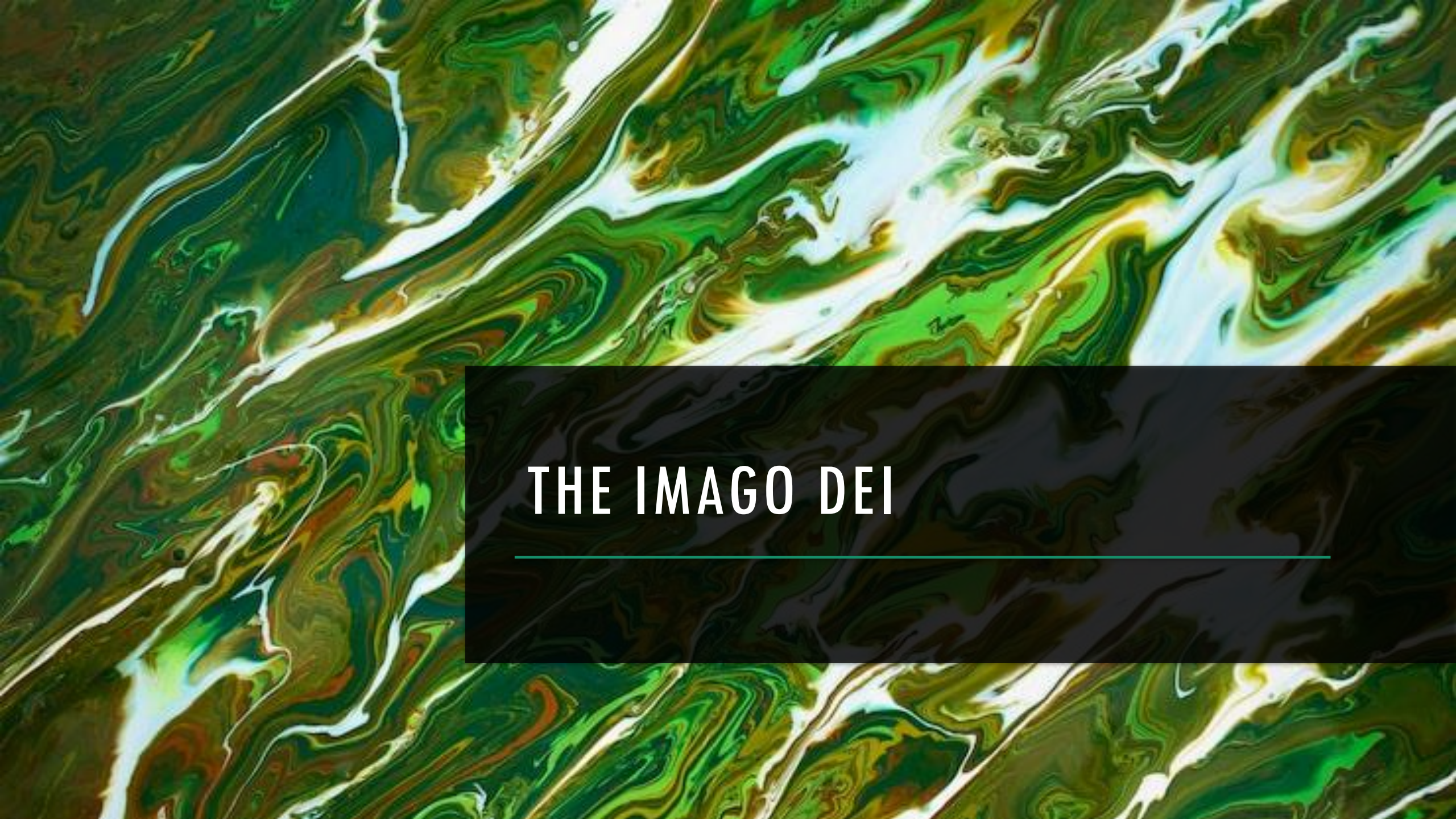
At the same time, creation *ex nihilo* does not imply that the world is unreal or insignificant. On the contrary, it affirms the goodness of the created reality, and of our created bodies.



CREATION EX NIHILO

This cosmological vision stands in contrast to dualistic worldviews that devalue material existence — think of those patterns of thinking that say that our minds are led astray by our bodies, or that thinking is good, but feeling is bad.

In contrast, Christianity insists that salvation does not mean escape from creation or from our bodies but its renewal. The resurrection of the body and the hope of a “new creation” affirm that God remains committed to the material world and to our material existence.



THE IMAGO DEI

THE IMAGO DEI

Within this vision of the created order, humanity occupies a distinctive place.

Genesis (1:26-27) declares:

“Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So, God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.”

Moving beyond cosmology (the study of the universe and how it came to be) this is one of the most influential and contested claims in Christian anthropology (the study of what it means to be human).

What does it mean to be made in the image of God?



THE IMAGO DEI

Historically, theologians have offered several interpretations of what the *imago Dei* means.

Some have identified the image with rationality: humans uniquely possess intellect and will, whereas animals and rocks do not. Others located it in moral capacity or in freedom of will.

Modern theology often resists reducing the image of God to a single trait. Instead, it understands *imago Dei* to be called to represent God within creation. In Genesis, this is immediately linked to responsibility: humanity is commanded to “have dominion” and to “till and keep” the earth.



THE IMAGO DEI

This has several important implications.

First, it affirms the inherent dignity of every human being. The image of God is not earned and cannot be lost.

It does not depend on intelligence, productivity, or moral achievement.

Infants, the disabled, the elderly, and the marginalised all bear the divine image.

This conviction undergirds Christian commitments to human rights, equality, and the sanctity of life.



THE IMAGO DEI

Second, the image of God establishes humanity's relational nature.

If God is relational, as the doctrine of the Trinity (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) claims, then to image God is to exist in communion with others.

Humans are therefore not isolated individuals but are constituted by their relationships.

Sin can therefore be understood as not merely rule-breaking but a distortion of relationship: with God, with others, and with the earth.



THE IMAGO DEI

Third, the imago Dei defines human authority as a form of stewardship rather than brute domination or ownership.

“Dominion” in Genesis has often been misread as license for exploitation, in that it expresses absolute control.

Yet in the biblical context, kings were said to be in the image of a god in order to rule well on the god’s behalf.

To bear God’s image therefore is to care for creation in ways that reflect God’s own character – ways that are faithful, generous, life-giving.



THE IMAGO DEI

This is important because we have a vision of the nature of God in our world in Jesus Christ.

The New Testament calls Christ “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). This means that the image is not merely a natural endowment but is fully realised in Christ. To be human, in the fullest sense, is to be like Christ.

This reframes our human identity, because humanity is not defined merely by biology or culture but by our relation to God. Christian anthropology is therefore teleological: it understands human beings in terms of what they might be, rather than what we are now.

So too, Christian ethics calls on Christians to be better!





CREATION AND THE IMAGO DEI

CREATION AND THE IMAGO DEI

Christian doctrines of creation and the imago Dei inevitably interact with scientific accounts of the world. Modern cosmology speaks of a universe billions of years old. Evolutionary biology describes humanity as emerging from earlier life forms. Some see these accounts as incompatible with Christian belief.

Yet creation ex nihilo does not necessarily compete with scientific explanations. It does not describe *how* the universe developed but *why* anything exists at all.

CREATION AND THE IMAGO DEI

Science generally investigates processes within the universe while theology reflects on the existence and meaning of those processes for us.

Similarly, the image of God need not be tied to a literal reading of Genesis.

It does not require that humans be created in a single moment distinct from all other animals.

Rather, it affirms that whenever and however humanity emerged, God addresses human beings in a distinctive way.

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CREATION AND THE IMAGO DEI

This allows theology to engage with science constructively.

The immense age and scale of the universe can deepen wonder at creation while evolutionary interdependence can reinforce the sense that humans belong within, rather than above, the natural world.



CREATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT

CREATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Beliefs about creation and the *imago Dei* also have profound ethical consequences, especially in an age of ecological crisis.

If the world is created by God and declared good, then it is not merely a resource for human use, but it has intrinsic value as God's work. Environmental destruction is therefore not only imprudent, but can be sinful and damaging to our relationship with God.



CREATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The *imago Dei* further intensifies ethical responsibility towards our created order – which, of course, includes other humans.

Humans are capable of transforming the planet on an unprecedented scale, which mirrors divine creativity, but it also magnifies moral accountability.

Environmental ethics, from a Christian perspective, are therefore not optional as it flows from worship of the creator and the goodness of the Creator's ongoing gift to us.



CREATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.”

So God created mankind in his own image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.

God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

Then God said, “I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. ³⁰ And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds in the sky and all the creatures that move along the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it—I give every green plant for food.” And it was so.

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.

Genesis 1:26-31

CREATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT

If every person bears God's image, then systems that degrade or exclude are likely violations of divine intent.

Racism, poverty, and violence are not merely social problems there — they are theological contradictions which deny the image of God in others.

Christian theology insists that care for creation and care for neighbor belong together because both operate and exist within a relationship with God.

To love God is to honor God's work; to love your neighbor is to respect God's image in them.



CREATION AND THE ENVIRONMENT

The doctrine of creation situates Christian faith within a world that is a gift to us, not accident in which we find ourselves stuck.

The world is contingent, good, and sustained by God. Humanity, created in the image of God, occupies a distinctive place within this order; not as owner, but as representative of God.

In Jesus Christ, the nature of the image of God is revealed in its fullest way and offered as an example for humanity to follow in our dealings with others.





Genesis 1–2

**Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book IV
(excerpt)**

READINGS