

THE ORTHODOX IDEA OF CREATION

By John L. Boojamra, Ph.D.

THIS ARTICLE IS WRITTEN to supplement the overall curriculum of the Orthodox Christian Education Commission. Creation, where we came from and where we are going, the purpose of the non-human reality and its goal, and responsibility for creation is just one of many issues that has arisen recently. This has caused some confusion among new Orthodox and those raised in the faith. The ideas here are derived from my own research in St. Basil the Great's and St. Augustine's accounts of creation. The original purpose was to compare and contrast the Orthodox approach with that of the Latin west. There are significant differences. These differences do not concern us here. What does concern us here is that our children and adults get a firm foundation in the Orthodox idea of "created existence." There is just too much misinformation and "dysinformation" floating around that gets in the way of our children's proper education.

In attempting to understand the attitude of the Fathers of the Church and of the Eastern Church, in general, towards creation, we must keep several significant factors in mind. First, the science that they dealt with, let us say in the fourth century, when St. Basil the Great (+379) wrote his *Hexameron* ("On the Six Days of Creation"), was not science as we know it today. It was more of what we might describe as a natural philosophy. It was composed of theories [and] traditions drawn from ancient Greek writers, historians and philosophers, conclusions based on simple and simplistic observations, and metaphysical speculation. Second, we must distinguish between their attitude towards what was called science and their attitude towards the created universe as a phenomenon.

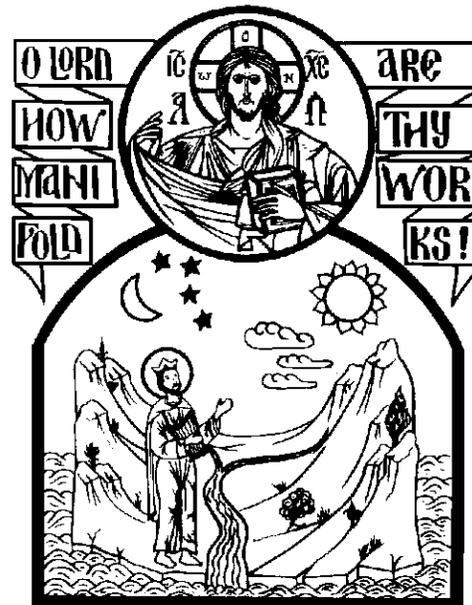
Suffice it to say on this first point that their science was the science of their age, with all its limitations. They believed, for instance, in the theory that all of creation was composed of the four elements (still found in the Orthodox service of the "blessing of the waters" and Baptismal service) -- fire, earth, air and water -- and spontaneous generation. To investigate this aspect of the question will lead us nowhere.

The two OCEC preschool grades and grade one deal with the Genesis account of creation and

mention Adam and Eve. It even suggests that there are a variety of ways and means that God may have used to bring human beings into existence. It even suggests an evolutionary process, with drawing of various types of hominids in a progression. Since the Church has committed itself to no one scientific explanation, the Orthodox Christian Education Commission opens up the possibility of some generic evolutionary process. The children are not shocked when they hear the word in school.

The real value of the Fathers for us today is their attitude toward the creation, nature, matter, humankind, and how they interact. This will help to lay the foundation for our own attitudes towards contemporary natural science, the created universe, and human's place in it and use of it.

This becomes extremely important as we approach 1) the doctrine of creation, 2) the Biblical treatment of creation, 3) the moral responsibility to creation in our curriculum from grades one through twelve.



The Fathers' approach to creation was based first on the text of the Scripture and not on philosophical principles. Being men of their age they used the wisdom of the Greek pagan

thinkers to make the attitude of the Bible more precise. Always, however, the Fathers were Christians; they based their cosmology on the first lines of Genesis and the Gospel of St. John (Genesis 1:1; St. John 1:1), and the Book of Job. There are certainly other creation accounts such as Psalm [103] 104, which the Church reads at Vespers every evening. The fact that it is read every day gives it more weight as a source for our own thinking about the nature of creation and salvation history. Pagan thought was modified for Christian purposes. This modification can be seen in their fundamental first-principle, their starting point, God the Creator. This affirmation specifically contradicted the Platonic and Aristotelian first-principle which affirmed the eternity of matter.

The question of the Fathers' attitude will be approached by dealing with four specific points which will articulate their attitudes.

1. The world, the universe, and all things that are not God are created out of nothing, *ex nihilo*. This is a fundamental definition, not only of creation, but also of God; He is a creator God. This doctrine, although stated explicitly only once in the Old Testament (2 Maccabees 7:28), is implied throughout the Old and New Testaments. It simply means that God made the world from nothing. He brought all things out of non-being into being. He allowed or, better yet, willed something to exist whose nature is absolutely different from His nature. Notice the separation between creation and God is not one of space, it is one of essence.

[For more] on creation out of "nothing," see *In the Beginning*, usually used with our fifth grade classes. Ten-year-olds will understand "nothingness" if compared to "space." For younger children, show a picture of a tundra running to the horizon. It is a difficult concept for early childhood children to accept never having existed.

2. The Bible and the Fathers never confuse the world with God, and this is a fundamental difference from the pagan approach. It should be noted that one of the reasons for the failure of an empirical science to develop in the pagan philosophical environment is the fact that the world was seen as an external manifestation or extension of the Godhead. Therefore, they could do little with it. It was sacred, it was God, and its manipulation had to be limited and propitiated continually. The poetic and metaphorical dynamism of Psalm [103] 104

makes this clear. Genesis is read perhaps once or twice a year, while Psalm [103] 104 is read every day at vespers. In addition, to the creation account is the role of many other creatures who seem to have (a) overlapping economies and (b) parallel economies with that of humankind.

The world is meant for our enjoyment and sustenance. Children in our earlier grades, pre-K, K, and first grades are encouraged to see the world as a place to belong and build relationships, relations are dealt with between humans and animals and among humans in families. As the children approach the second grade the children learn that they have responsibilities to others in communities. The Fathers, and especially St. Basil, used the animal kingdom as moral examples for Christians to follow. Grade three deals with Psalm [103] 104 which I like to call the Song of Creation.

The third point follows from this. Creation was seen by the Fathers to be a result of the will of God. He willed it. He did not have to create it. It did not have to exist. It was not an uncontrollable spilling-over of the Godhead. It was not necessary. To describe this we say that it is *contingent*. It is totally dependent upon God for its existence. He is not only the Creator God but also the sustainer God, or better yet, the *Creating* God. Because it is contingent, its order, its richness is not obvious: its plan must be sought and investigated to be understood. St. Basil, in his beautiful hymn to the Creator God, *The Hexameron*, says that it is a deep mystery and the natural or created world must be investigated to be known. It cannot be imagined as a world of ideas existing in the mind, human or divine. In this he endorses the profane or pagan "wisdom" as useful. In fact, throughout his *Hexameron* he continually made critical use of all the Greek natural philosophers in order to render the world understandable, to reveal its hidden beauty and wisdom. Basil even goes as far as to recognize Moses' debt to the Egyptian knowledge and teaching in his writing of Genesis. Basil clearly had no fear of the science of his age, but neither did he slavishly accept it

Here is a tedious concept. Because something did not *have* to be the way it is, there is no necessity [for] it. If you want to know about it, you have to investigate it. You can't sit down, as some types of Greek philosophers might do and conjure up the picture of the best possible tree in [their] mind and then know everything about "treeness" without studying water flow,

transpiration, root hairs, and so forth. The created universe, because it was willed by God and did not have to exist, has to be explored and investigated to be known. Hence, it is open to experimentation. While humans may all be sinners, this is not in their nature. They are not, however, God and as creatures are by definition limited, but not necessarily bad. This [limitation] forces us to find out about the world by experimentation and investigation. The sixth grade goes extensively into the goodness of creation and people's place in it.

3. A third important point, especially for discussion of evolution, is the dynamic nature of the world. The world is real, it is not a pathetic shadow of God's ideas as in Platonism. Rather God's very creative "words," His energies, are part of creation. The world embodying these "words" shares in its own creation. It is a process extended in time from which God is not removed; He is continually sustaining it by His energies. While the Fathers affirmed that God is radically different, they maintained His continued and real association with the world.

This is a sensitive issue because people have beliefs about evolution that are often distortions of all theories of evolution. There is in the Orthodox Church no formal teaching against an evolutionary theory and a reading of St. Basil the Great and his brother St. Gregory of Nyssa indicates that their dynamic notion of creation would have been open to some sort of evolutionary theory. A theory of evolution, even though Darwin eventually became a non-believer, in no [way] violates any creation account. St. Basil even tells us that it is foolishness to take the First chapter of Genesis literally since how can there be days and nights before the sun was created on the third day. Again, the Orthodox Church has no official position and liturgically it is not even tied to the Genesis account, but to the poetical account of Psalm [103] 104, Genesis was meant to demonstrate that 1) God is the source of all things, 2) God creates out of love, 3) God will always care for us as Lord of Creation. Make sure children understand the difference between poetry, metaphor, and factual science. This is covered in grade six.

St. Basil, though rather simplistic, is very clear on this point; he writes that, both at the beginning and now, the earth brings forth life; God's command to creation is part of creation. Though he demonstrated this by reference to the

now rejected belief in spontaneous generation, his point is well taken. The mud, he writes, did not stay dormant; it gave forth and continues to give forth life. For this reason, he calls the earth a "Great Mother."



Clearly in the patristic approach the sub-human reality, which is referred to as nature, is valuable. God clearly has an association with it in as much as it continues to exist. The sub-human nature is not merely a static stage for a Divine-human drama. The New Testament uses the word *Ktisis* for creation. St. Paul says in Romans 8:22 "For we know that the whole *Ktisis* (Creation) groans in travail and pain together until now." This because of Adam's sin which carried all of creation with it into a "twisted" nature. This is a dynamic New Testament approach that is continued in the Patristic concept. The word *ktisis* is itself a dynamic word. This dynamic concept thus is fundamentally Biblical and Patristic and points out that man and the creation share common destiny (read Romans 8:20-22).

We are tied together with all of the non-human creation and share the same fate. We are not only tied together but responsible for each other -- creation feeds us and protects us and we care for it. See the two modules of the soon-to-appear eleventh grade book *Discoveries* which deals with the creation of humankind and the non-human reality. The tenth grade book, *Celebration*, deals with the creation Psalms and it studies the major feast days of the Church year. Psalm [103] 104 also makes it clear, and younger children usually respond to this, that different

animals are described in different settings, and the leviathan (translated as whale) was made to *play* in the sea. To play in the sea! A strange notion to those who think that everything was created for humankind and its needs; the whale apparently can get by with just playing and fulfilling its Godly purpose.

4. The fourth and final point to consider in attempting to see something of the Fathers' attitude toward creation is the place of man; what is man's role in created existence? Answering this question will help us to understand something of the Christian attitude toward the world.

On the role of humankind, we see the Biblical attitude carried forward and articulated in the Fathers. Man is a unique creature because he is a unity of two worlds -- body and soul, matter and spirit. He is not human if he lacks either. ([A person] does not have a body, [he/she] is a body.) Because of this, humans are called a microcosm (a miniature world) by the Fathers and were seen as the meeting place, the bridge, of two worlds "For diverse natures come together in man, to form in him one unique perfection," [said] St. Maximos the Confessor in the seventh century. Because of this twofold unity man is seen to be the mediator, or reconciler, uniting all created things together, redeeming all things by offering them back to God in an act of thanksgiving.

This is a grave moral responsibility. We have to care for the earth. Here, without going into detail appropriate for adult education, the notion of Stewardship has come to replace in modern Christian thought the notion of dominion and exploitation. I have heard some Protestant fundamentalist friends of mine refer to this as "creation" worship. Nonsense! Responsibility, even in a sense mutuality, [exists] between the human and non-human creation for each other. St. Basil the Great himself teaches that God's very energies, his words, his *logoi* are in creation and make it what it is.

While humankind is seen not only as the focal point of creation but also as its crown, it [i.e. humankind] is not the lord of creation. Only Almighty God is Lord of Creation. Genesis makes this clear. Humans are called to rule creation, but they rule not by magic, because they would imply we know the mind of God, but by understanding and investigation. Here are the roots of science. This anthropology is not

dependent on any particular cosmology; if we look at the modern scientific and evolutionary view of the world, we find several Christian scholars who see a restatement of the same point. Particularly, Teilhard de Chardin and Theodosios Dobzansky have worked out the same anthropology more meaningfully in relationship to world view.

Humankind is the final and latest product of a long bio-historical process. He is the crown and controller of creation. The destiny of the race and the plant and probably the universe is within man. This Orthodox intuition has never been clearer than it is now. Here is humankind's role as unifier, the body is his special gift that gives him a special place in the Divine economy. To a large extent, [the] essential material nature of man leads to the identification of the body with materialism. An unfortunate conclusion in the light of the materialism of Christ's Incarnation so blatantly reflected in our Divine Liturgy.

Several concluding remarks:

1. The fathers did not directly make an appeal to the Bible on scientific questions (this was probably a later phenomenon).
2. The freely-will creation is not obvious, it must be investigated to be understood.
3. Creation is valuable because it embodies the creative *energies* of God.
4. Man was part of the world, nature's partner, and the crown and steward of creation.
5. The Logos is the Source, the Sustainer, and the Goal of all created life.

In many ways it seems that the Patristic concept of creation is closer to the modern world view that the Western Christian concepts of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries which adopted the static view characteristic of a good deal of Greek philosophy.

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Regardless of which curriculum a parish is using, the information in this article is very useful for our teachers' and students' understanding of Creation. PMO (1/2000)