

A Phony War

Gregory Hallam

It has become a truism for many in the West that faith and science belong to two conflicting worldviews. An atheist may say that science is rational, based on empirical observation and necessarily self-correcting as new theories eventually modify or replace old and outdated ones. Faith, on the other hand, is said to be irrational, defined by static religious texts and immovable religious authorities, which can be neither challenged nor revised. The religious fundamentalist often regards science with suspicion, seeing its allegedly ungodly encroachment in territory governed by unquestioned divine revelation. There is another view that regards this conflict as a needless clash of two titans of similar breed: fundamentalism in religion and triumphalism in science. Rather than a genuine standoff between two antagonists, this account suggests a phony war based on a cartoon version of both disciplines and, therefore, a misunderstanding of the true purpose of each. This reconciling approach sees no necessary conflict between truth-seeking in science and faith but rather regards both as mutually dependent and complementary. At its best and in its most authentic expression, Orthodox Christianity shares a common platform with these more positive voices, but with its own distinctive approach.

The trouble with this alienation between faith and science is that it is so deeply embedded in Western culture that it seems blind to its own myopic

view of reality and the spiritual and intellectual origins of its unquestioned assumptions. In propaganda terms, atheist popularizers have a vested interest in attacking a caricature of religion as normatively fundamentalist. In the general population, the level of religious literacy is so low that many simply buy the half-baked notions that seem to be continually recycled in the latest paperbacks of authors who have made a very decent living out of the whole sorry enterprise. Since many people unquestioningly assume that all Christians are the same and believe the same things, it has become almost impossible for Orthodox Christians to contribute to the debate without being written off as self-serving or idiosyncratic. I do not think, however, that we shall be able to improve on this situation until we can put some clear blue water between the caricature and the reality, with respect to both science and religion.

Something from Nothing

The Jews did not know God because they philosophized about him, but rather because they had entered into a relationship with the One who had made friends of Abraham and the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets. His ways had been made known in salvation and judgment; and this required from those who wished to be his friends continuing faithfulness and love, repentance and hope. The expression of this relationship was a personal and existential knowledge of the cre-

ator, utterly transcendent of anything created—literally the Uncreated One. This transcendent Being whom they came to know as above and beyond infinity, space, time, and created reality itself was so sacred that even his name could not be spoken. Later in Israel's history, and particularly after the emergence of the Wisdom writings in the post-exilic environment of Hellenism, the people of God began to reflect more thoroughly on the presuppositions and implications of their faith in an utterly transcendent creator. There is then a marked progression and refinement in understanding, for example, between Genesis, which only considers creation from the starting point of unformed matter (1:2), and 2 Maccabees 7:28, which follows the received faith to its logical conclusion, namely that the cosmos was made out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) or rather, more properly, out of that which had no being.

The implications of the *ex nihilo* doctrine are radical when contrasted with the confusion of nature and God that is often characteristic of pagan and polytheist faiths. St. Augustine emphasized that both space and time were created with matter and energy, making the terms “before creation” and “after creation” meaningless. So there is both creation *before* time (a singular Big Bang or multiple primordial creations) and creation *in* time as the one cosmos or the multiverse evolves. Before-time creation is possible insofar as God, in his essence, utterly transcends everything he creates. In-time creation is possible because God embeds himself in the cosmos from the outset by his energies.

The atheistic scientific approach, on the other hand, denies the *a priori* existence of anything other than the cosmos, (or in the “many-worlds” hypothesis, the multiverse), in this case, the existence of God. Under this view,

creation makes itself, there being no extrinsic divine agent to bring it into being. However, such spontaneous creation is never actually explained in these theories without some sort of precursor. Two favored current theories involve a quantum irregularity in the substrate vacuum, which super-inflated like a bubble in a boiling pan of milk, and the collision of two higher-dimensional sheets or *branes* which triggered the Big Bang in the energy of their collision. None of this solves the puzzle as to why there should be a bubbling quantum foam or a system of colliding branes in the first place. The precursor may be necessary and true, but whatever “it” is, this precursor is not nothing or non-being. The search for a first cause or an origin only ceases if a beginning is considered unnecessary—and then one is stuck with the brute fact of an eternal, infinitely regressive universe.

The question about whether or not the universe is eternal still ignores the favorite old elephant in the corner. This is the crucial question: “Why is there something rather than nothing?” Science is not equipped to answer “why” questions such as this, whereas such unfathomable existential issues are food and drink to the philosopher and the theologian. The hubris of an all-inclusive positivism enables atheist scientists to claim scientifically that no such theological answers can exist in principle. That is to step beyond the boundary of empirical science itself into belief—in this case the belief we call “unbelief.” It must be recognized that there are questions and answers in life that do not submit to the scientific method, because they deal with references that are by definition not measurable. Measuring my heartbeat alone will not reveal whether or not I am in love.

Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow described the conundrum of existence

from a religious point of view. He described both the terror and the beauty of our existence very succinctly. The choice is stark and uncompromising: the void or God? “All creatures are balanced upon the creative Word of God, as if upon a bridge of diamond; above them is the abyss of divine infinitude, below them, that of their own nothingness.”¹

God Beyond and Within the Cosmos

The transcendent majesty and glory of God—his singular unexcelled and excellent being—is the concern of all truly monotheistic faiths. Any conceptualization, image, or formulation concerning God in his essence or being is idolatrous and should be rejected. There can be absolutely no ontological overlap between God the creator and Uncreated One and creation. However, to say that God is utterly distinct from creation at the level of his essence is to contribute nothing to an understanding of *how* he can be known by humankind through his covenanted grace, his theophanies or self-manifestations, and supremely by his Incar-

nation in the Word made flesh (John 1:14). The scriptures and the tradition of the Church teach that God manifests himself in creation without being absorbed by it or fused with it, which of course would be pantheism. By way of contrast, the Orthodox teaching that incorporates the reality of the Divine Presence is called *panentheism*, which received its classic formulation in the distinction made between the essence and energies of God in the works of St. Gregory Palamas. The energies of God are sometimes referred to as his immanence in creation. God is not to be thought of, therefore, as only acting “from beyond.” He also (by his energies) acts from within.

Orthodox theism, therefore, is wholly compatible with a scientific account of the world in which the lineaments and workings of natural processes in space and in time are accounted for without thinking of God as supplanting those natural processes supernaturally. If, for example, primitive men believed that hurricanes happened because God sneezed, then weather forecasts would be pointless. With our meteorological knowledge we can have instead a true picture of the world, revealing both the beauty and power of God’s creative acts, even when terrible destruction is involved. When the forces of nature threaten human existence, this is not an evil but an aspect of creation’s necessary dynamism, and hence, its life-creating potential. These embedded creative potentialities cannot be explained by invoking the erratic interventions of an episodically active deity in the supposedly chaotic, frequently fragile and dangerous evolutionary processes. Such extrinsic and invasive actions of a god from beyond the cosmos—the classic form of supernaturalism—neuter both science and theology. The divine creative imprint is rather to be found in the beauty, elegance and fittingness of the natural operations

¹ Quoted by Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), 92.

“Cosmic Holiday Ornament”: Planetary nebula NGC 5189 as photographed by Hubble Space Telescope. NASA/Hubble.



themselves which are both emergent in their complexity and convergent in their function. Consciousness, for example, is a fluid and dynamic artifact of emergent complexity; physiological commonality a functional convergence of evolution. Neither is a deterministic process, but each nonetheless has its own teleology (that to which it tends), notwithstanding the apparently (to us) chaotic and random factors involved. God, then, only acts “from beyond” when, *ex nihilo*, he creates space, time, energy, and matter. He acts “from within” to sustain and drive forward both the cosmos and emergent life within it as these evolve toward consciousness and therefore also the worship and cooperation of sentient intelligent beings.

This characterization, however, may suggest a scheme of primary and secondary causes with God in the backseat and nature in the front. How then is this different from deism, the belief that the God who is aboriginally involved in creation is subsequently absent, or Neo-Thomism, the idea that divine intervention is a more subtly conceived additional layer of supernatural causation? The only way such a model of divine action can be different, at least in Christianity, is by building it on a radically different foundation than that which has been commonplace in the West since the Middle Ages. This foundation is neo-patristic, in that it learns from the fathers’ engagement with Hellenistic philosophy while at the same time striking out into the arena of this century and its concerns.

There are three theological references that we need to consider in order to make progress in constructing an “old but new” model of divine activity that compromises neither science nor Orthodox Christianity. These three theological references are truly basic and biblical: the Word of God, the Spirit

of God, and the Wisdom of God. The Word of God (that is, the Logos) and the Holy Spirit are two hypostases of the Trinity, the Father’s agents in creation. The Wisdom of God has often struggled to find a place in this scheme, for she (in reference feminine) certainly is not an additional hypostasis, nor the essence or energy of God, but something else. Rehabilitated from ancient Christian tradition by the sophiological school of Russian Orthodox Christian thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Holy Wisdom, is, I submit, a shared divine attribute which we can apply to *all* three hypostases or persons of the Holy Trinity in the summation of their activity in the cosmos as one God. I shall refer, therefore, to Wisdom in relation to each and all of the hypostases in the following account. The Father is in relation to the Son or Word and the Spirit as the timeless source of the Trinity. He is never without them, nor they without him. In the course of this proposal, therefore, I shall proceed in my argument from the Logos in Wisdom (from the Father alone but in the Spirit) to the Spirit in Wisdom (from the Father alone but in the Son). The Father, of course, timelessly imparts Wisdom to both the Son and the Spirit in their coordinated actions as one God in creation.

Logos Christology

St. John the Theologian, in the prologue to his Gospel, taught that it was the Logos (the Word of God) that was active in both the creation of the cosmos and in the Incarnation.² St. John deftly achieved two goals in his use of this Logos Christology. First, he showed the universality of the Incarnation by using a term that was familiar to Jews and pre-Christian Greeks—the Logos. The Jewish diaspora in Alexandria (Philo) had already united the Hebraic concept of the Word of God (*dabar*) with the Hellenistic Logos,

² I am indebted in much of what follows to Christopher Knight, whose reasoning and conclusions I largely follow; the sophiological speculations are my own. Christopher C. Knight, *The God of Nature: Incarnation and Contemporary Science* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

the divine seed inherent in all things. Second, by using the single term *Logos*, St. John ensured that Christ would be received rightly as the Lord of all creation. Christians such as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen continued to develop this synthesis and used it as a bridgehead for the communication of the Gospel in Greek culture. Pre-Christian Greek philosophy, at this stage heavily influenced by Plato, contributed something of great value to Christianity: the means to express the inclusion of both nature and revelation as within the sphere of God's action. The Church reimagined Platonism from a dualistic philosophy in which created forms were mere shadows of more substantial heavenly ideals to the Judeo-Christian confession of the goodness of creation itself.

Important progress in the development of these ideas is reflected in the cosmological teaching of the Byzantine theologian St. Maximus the Confessor (580–662). St. Maximus explored further this idea of the *logoi* in all things created as manifestations of the creative Word, the *Logos* imparting both inner essence and ultimate fulfillment to one and all.³ In this account, the Incarnation was not an abrupt intrusion or invasion of the *Logos* into the created order from which it was originally absent, but rather the personal and particular development and refinement of an existing and universal creative presence of the Word, now united to human flesh and nature in the person of Christ. Although the Incarnation happened so that death might be destroyed and humanity—with creation—restored to the path of dynamic transformation, the East generally held that the Word would have been made flesh in the context of this process even if humanity had not fallen. It is, after all, the nature of Divine Love to make itself known through self-giving.

St. Maximus, together with all of the Greek fathers and their successors, had a panentheistic conception of God's immanence that harmonized ideas from both pagan and Hebraic religion without sacrificing God's transcendence. Later generations of theologians, most notably St. Gregory Palamas, articulated this conception by distinguishing between the nature or essence of God, forever transcending anything created, and his energies, also God and uncreated but manifest in every space-time coordinate and in every physical and immaterial creation. After the Great Schism in 1054, when the West began to lose touch with Greek Christian culture, this vital insight was gradually lost. Later Western theologians assumed as axiomatic the principle that God had to "move," as it were, from heaven to earth when he needed to act, his presence otherwise being rather nebulous and erratic. This was the source of supernaturalism, the notion that grace had to be added to nature. This view prevailed for centuries until the Enlightenment finally dispensed with supernaturalism, leaving the West in the grip of deism or the worship of the goddess Reason. Secularization rapidly followed as the sea of faith made its melancholic withdrawal from the public consciousness. However, the Christian East continued with what we might call its theistic naturalism, in which the Lord pervaded the whole of the cosmos, without the need to suspend natural laws at whim in order to achieve his purpose. Creation has complete freedom to be itself, and yet at the same time there is a natural and grace-full growth in the *logoi* or *Logos* towards an end or *telos* in God. In the Christian West, science only flourished after the Catholic Church's inflexible intellectual control had been broken. There never seems to have been such a problem in the Christian East, and for good reason. The phony war between science and religion never broke out

³ A physical expression of the *logoi* well documented by contemporary science is the principle of emergent complexity. By means of a few simple rules, systems of matter and energy seem to follow a line of higher and more complex organizational function and integration, of which life and consciousness are perhaps the most extraordinary and beautiful examples.

beyond Rome's dominion—nor could it, because Roman Catholic theology was so radically different.

The Life-Giving Spirit

The unique theological perspective of the Christian East, which the Orthodox believe to be the simple witness of scripture and tradition, is expressed in its understanding of the person and work of the Holy Spirit as well as the Logos. The Holy Spirit is the life-giver, the power of creation, of revelation, of guidance, of cleansing, of renewal, of holiness, of justice, and of peace. The action of the Holy Spirit in human life and the cosmos itself is simply to bring the fullness of life to all that is latent within the *logoi* of created things. This, however, is not a vitalism that constitutes or replaces the energies of creation, but rather that which restores and enhances these energies according to their divine purpose. Consider the healing of the sick. This is achieved through the skill of doctors, nurses, surgeons, and drug researchers, in addition to the care for the whole person manifested through pastoral support and prayer. The Holy Spirit works in and through the *logoi* of each means of healing, once more revealing the Wisdom of God in action, bringing everything to its proper fulfillment in Christ.⁴

The Holy Spirit also continues to work in creation, so that in the Wisdom of God the cosmos is transfigured and, in the case of humans, made in the divine image and likeness, deified. Again, St. Maximus the Confessor reveals that this cosmic regeneration is possible by reaffirming a pre-Christian notion of

Greek philosophy—namely, that humankind is a microcosm. If humanity is restored and set free by the Holy Spirit, so shall the cosmos be (Rom. 8:18–23). This glorious vision is not of course what we see in the world today. We have inherited the legacy of a quite different view of the earth in which divine transformation is very far from the mind of those who are its unwitting stewards. The impact of this legacy is plain for all to see. The recovery of Earth's ecosystems will only occur when humans exercise once again an asceticism of self-restraint and live out anew their connectedness to the cosmos. This will require a spirituality that does not see the natural world as a mere stage for unbridled human activity but rather a gift to be respected and cherished. To achieve this respect and deep sense of being cherished, it is essential to honor the divine *logoi* that inhere within all things.

I have contended that there is no conflict between science and religion, when each discipline is properly understood. More specifically, it should be recognized that Orthodox Christianity has developed important insights into that fine structure of the cosmos which allows for divine action without compromising or controlling creation's freedom to move toward its goal in God. It should now be clear that both creationism and scientific atheism are dead doctrines based on a weak understanding of both science and religion. In contrast, Orthodox Christianity offers the freedom to humanity to explore the inner workings of the cosmos in all its glory and beauty. ✱

⁴ The origins of this Orthodox tradition of holistic healing have been set out in *Holistic Healing in Byzantium*, ed. John T. Chirban (Brookline, Mass.: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010).



The V. Rev. Gregory Hallam serves a parish in Manchester, UK, and belongs to the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of the British Isles and Ireland. He also serves on the Theological Committee of the Assembly of Bishops for the British Isles.