

THE WORLDVIEW OF THE FATHERS AND THE COSMOLOGICAL PARADIGMS

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MY CONTENTION

- Whilst based on such axiomatic statements like the universe as created by God out of nothing, the early Christian worldview (=cosmology) consists of various trends, ideas and interpretations
 - The Fathers addressed the cosmos from a variety of viewpoints, such as doctrinal, polemical, exegetical and spiritual, resulting in a wide range of cosmological representations
 - A special case is represented by the interactions between the worldview of the Fathers and the scientific cosmologies of Late Antiquity, on which I shall focus in what follows
 - In short, whilst the early Fathers actively and creatively engaged the scientific and/or philosophical cosmologies of their time, they both accepted and rejected aspects pertaining to those paradigms, together with maintaining the independence of the Christian representation of reality
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ELEMENTS OF THE PATRISTIC WORLDVIEW

- **An ecclesial perception of reality**
- St Ignatius 'Theophorus' of Antioch
- “How did he [i.e. Christ] become manifest to the worlds [...]? A star whose light was ineffable shone in the sky more than all the stars, and its novelty bewildered. All the other stars, along with the sun and the moon, became a chorus for the [new] star, whose light surpassed that of all the others.” (*To the Ephesians*, 19.2).
- “For your presbytery [...] is attuned to the bishop as the strings of a lyre. Therefore Jesus Christ is praised in your concurrence and consonant love. And each man should join the chorus so that, being consonant in harmony and taking up God’s tune in unity, you may sing with one voice through Jesus Christ to the Father, that he may both hear and recognise you through the good deeds you achieve, since you are members of his Son.” (*To the Ephesians*, 4.1-2).

ELEMENTS OF THE PATRISTIC WORLDVIEW

- **A musical perception of reality**
 - St Irenaeus of Lyon
 - [The cosmos is one out of many and various beings,] “the way the sound of the lyre, which consists of many and opposite sounds, makes one harmonious melody through the interval pertaining to them.” (*Against Heresies*, 2.25.2).
 - Clement the Alexandrian
 - “...this pure song [of the Logos], a support of all and the harmony of all, after being stretched from the centres to the limits and from the extremities to those in the middle, brought this universe to a measure [...] according to the fatherly intention of God...” (*Exhortation to the Gentiles*, 1.5.2).
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ELEMENTS OF THE PATRISTIC WORLDVIEW

- A musical perception of reality
- St Athanasius the Great
- “When one hears from a distance a lyre made of many and various strings, and marvels at the harmony of its symphony, [...] even without seeing the musician [one would conclude] that there is someone, who by his knowledge combined the sound of each string into a melodious symphony. Similarly, given the perfect harmony within the whole cosmos [...] and the one perfect order of all things, it follows that there should be construed one master and king of all the creation, [...], who by his own light shines upon all things and moves them.” (*Against the Gentiles*, 38.4).

ELEMENTS OF THE PATRISTIC WORLDVIEW

- An artistic and scriptural perception of reality
 - St Athanasius the Great
 - “By his own Logos, God embellished the creation, so that even though he is by nature invisible people may know him through his works. As it happens, even when not seen the artist is known through his works.” (*Against the Pagans*, 35.1).
 - “[People can] acquire the knowledge of God from the visible things, the creation pointing to and loudly declaring its own Lord and Creator by its order and harmony as though through letters.” (*Against the Gentiles*, 34.4).
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ELEMENTS OF THE PATRISTIC WORLDVIEW

- Approaching reality through the lens of Genesis
- St Gregory of Nyssa
- “[T]he prophet wrote the book of Genesis as an introduction to the divine knowledge, the intention of Moses being to lead by the hand those enslaved by the senses – through the visible things – to the perception of the things that transcend the senses.” (*An Apology for the Hexaemeron*, 8).

ELEMENTS OF THE PATRISTIC WORLDVIEW

- Creation as a polemical tool
- St Athanasius the Great
- “[I]t should suffice that the creation itself all but shouts against them, and points to its Creator and Maker God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who reigns over the creation and the universe – from whom the seeming philosophers turn away to venerate and deify the creation which came into being from him, and which itself venerates and confesses the Lord whom they deny on its account.” (*Against the Gentiles*, 27.3).

ELEMENTS OF THE PATRISTIC WORLDVIEW

- Creation as a polemical tool
- St Basil the Great
- “...the cosmos has not been conceived vainly and without reason given that it is assembled for some beneficial purpose and the great use of all beings. Thus, since it truly is a teaching-ground for conscious souls and a school of divine knowledge], through the guidance of the visible and sensible things the mind is led to the contemplation of the invisible ones.” (*Homilies on the Hexaemeron* 1.6).
- “I want you to imprint in yourself an utmost sense of wonder for what is made, so that irrespective of where you are, the presence of some of those belonging to the genus of growing things [plants] clearly reminds you of the creator.” (*Homilies on the Hexaemeron* 5.2).

ELEMENTS OF THE PATRISTIC WORLDVIEW

- Creation as a polemical tool
- St Basil the Great
- “The sages among the Greeks have struggled [to elaborate] many [theories] about nature, but not one idea of theirs remained unmoved and unshaken, the latter overthrowing the previous one. [...] Ignoring God, they could not conceive that an intelligent cause preceded the genesis of all, drawing their conclusions from their initial ignorance [concerning God].” (*Homilies on the Hexaemeron* 1.2).

A PATRISTIC DESCRIPTION OF REALITY

- The created cosmos as a synergetic event
- St Basil the Great
- “[The earth] was in painful labours with the generation of all things through the power stored in it by the demiurge, waiting for the auspicious times when, by a divine call, it would bring out into the open the things engendered within it.” (*Homilies on the Hexaemeron* 2.3).
- “[The Holy Spirit] thoroughly warmed up and vivified the nature of the waters, like in the image of a bird hatching the eggs, endowing them with some sort of living power.” (*Homilies on the Hexaemeron* 2.6).
- “Think of the word of God running through creation, still active now as it has been from the beginning, and efficient until the end in order to bring the world to fulfilment.” (*Homilies on the Hexaemeron* 9.2).

A PATRISTIC DESCRIPTION OF REALITY

- Engaging science
- St Gregory of Nyssa
- “Being wholly mighty, by his wise and powerful will he [God] forcefully brought together at once all that matter consists of for the completion of beings, [namely,] lightness [and] heaviness, density [and] perviousness, softness [and] hardness, humidity [and] dryness, coolness [and] hotness, colour, shape, contour and extension. Taken one by one all these are mere thoughts and concepts; none of these constitutes matter of its own but when they reciprocally converge they become matter.” (*An Apology for the Hexaemeron*, 7).

LATE ANTIQUE SCIENTIFIC COSMOLOGY

- Various cosmological paradigms
 - Dualistic worldviews (spirit and matter)
 - Platonism
 - Stoicism
 - Gnosticism
 - Middle- and Neo-Platonism
 - Manichaeism
 - The onion layered cosmos (holistic and hierarchical)
 - Aristotle
 - Ptolemy
 - Materialistic worldviews (Democritus)
 - Cyclical cosmologies (Zeno)
 - The static worldview (Parmenides)
 - The dynamic worldview (Heraclitus)
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THE WAY OF THE FATHERS

- Vladimir Lossky
- “The cosmology of the Greek Fathers is necessarily expressed in terms of the conception of the universe which prevailed in their own age; a fact which takes nothing whatever away from the properly theological basis of their commentaries upon the biblical narrative of the creation. The theology of the Orthodox Church, constantly soteriological in its emphasis, has never entered into alliance with philosophy in any attempt at a doctrinal synthesis [...]. Having no philosophical preferences, the Church always freely makes use of philosophy and the sciences for apologetic purposes, but she never has any cause to defend these relative and changing truths as she defends the unchangeable truth of her doctrines. This is why ancient or more modern cosmological theories cannot affect in any way the more fundamental truth which is revealed to the Church...” (*The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002, 104).

WHAT DO WE DO?

- What do we take from the Late Antique worldview of the Fathers, and what do we reject from it?
- In what ways can we follow in the footsteps of the Fathers in facing the scientific cosmology of our time?
- But do we really need to engage contemporary cosmology?