

# Two Anthropological Standpoints - Is there a Midpoint?

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Protopresbyter Dr Doru Costache  
<http://www.sagotc.edu.au>  
<http://sagotc.academia.edu/DoruCostache>



# My contention

## \* Recapitulation

- \* First meeting: The early Church fathers exhibited various attitudes toward the scientific, philosophical and cultural milieu of their time, adopting a selective (or critical) approach; as a common trend, they rejected ideas and interpretations that were unprofitable for the Christian mission whilst adopting those that served the ecclesial purposes; what made integration possible was the neutral character of the scientific enquiry
- \* Second meeting: The early Church fathers approached the mystery of reality from various angles, such as liturgical, ethical and doxological, representing the world in ways that were independent from the scientific description; due to the specifics of the ecclesial worldview, the traditional representation of reality can make use of any scientific information, as a communication channel, without having to commit itself to such information or defend such means of communication; this makes possible the engagement of any scientific and/or cultural paradigm from a theological viewpoint



# My contention

- \* What I propose
  - \* As with cosmology, where we could very well communicate our theological message about the universe (i.e. that it is created and led by God, whilst all things move in accordance with the λόγος or the divine principles) within any scientific paradigm (e.g. the onion layered model of antiquity, the infinite universe of modernity), ecclesial anthropology does not need the sciences of antiquity (e.g. the Platonic schema of mind, soul and body) in order to be communicated
  - \* Following the holy fathers, for missionary purposes we should communicate our traditional message about the human being (=theological anthropology) by way of contemporary categories and not through the vocabulary of the ancient sciences



# Patristic anthropology

- ★ Various models
  - ★ Whilst we find a range of anthropological ideas in the early Church fathers, such as the dichotomical (soul and body) and the trichotomical (mind or spirit, soul and body) models, these representations can be summarised, as Vladimir Lossky (cf. *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*) suggested, as follows: The human being is made of two distinct layers, the nature (φύσις) and the person (πρόσωπον)
- ★ A typical example is the anthropological model proposed by St Gregory of Nyssa (cf. *On the Structure of the Human Being*, aka *On the Making of Man*)
  - ★ **Human nature**, which is microcosmic, recapitulating or encompassing within it all the layers of the universe, visible and invisible
  - ★ **The image of God in us**, or the person in relationship with God and/or theologically defined



# Again St Gregory of Nyssa

- ★ **Human nature** can be analysed according to the scientific method; in fact, after the discussion regarding the microcosmic aspect of nature, St Gregory offered a lengthy scientific description of the body and how all its organs work – according to the medical knowledge of the time. This same approach was later adopted by St John Damascene (cf. *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*)
- ★ **Human person**, made in the image of God, is ‘above nature’ or, as Panayiotis Nellas (cf. *Deification in Christ*) would say, is irreducible to nature; as such, it represents a level of reality that is out of the reach of science (given that the scope of science is nature)
- ★ **Wisdom**: within the human being there is a side that can be scientifically analysed and another side that is explored only from a theological vantage point



# Today

- ★ Evolutionary anthropology discusses the natural processes of biological development and/or transformation, either from a species to another or within the same species; the factors at work are of a genetic and adaptive order; true, there is also a branch called cultural anthropology, that does not reduce the human phenomenon to chemistry and genetics
- ★ Issues with evolutionary anthropology: it is reductionist, perceiving the human being only through the lens of nature; there is no purpose to our existence other than to survive and reproduce
- ★ Issues with the atheistic ideologies that proliferate in the shadows of evolutionary anthropology: they deny the spiritual side of the human being, as they deny also the existence and activity of God



# Our task

- \* Returning to St Gregory of Nyssa (via Lossky and Nellas), we should distinguish between nature and person; subsequently, we should promote a holistic approach that makes room for both science and theology
  - \* Scientific anthropology (evolution, genetics) tells us more about the human nature than the biology of antiquity
  - \* Theological anthropology maintains its traditional teaching about the human being made in the image of God, and called to the likeness (virtuous life) and union (participation in the divine life) with God
- \* The two sides of the human being should be explored by way of appropriate methods



# Is there a midpoint?

- \* No. The way the two sides of the human being are irreducible to one another, scientific anthropology (which explores the human nature) and theological anthropology (which explores the human person) are neither interchangeable nor replaceable. In the exploration of the human being, there is room for the scientific expertise to have its say with reference to our nature, like in St Gregory of Nyssa and St John Damascene. But there is also room for theology, regarding the person made in the image of God. Neither theology is scientifically competent nor science is theologically competent. And since the human mystery consists in both nature and the image of God, both theology and science should have their say; nevertheless, their views are never expected to mingle