



Science and Theology: Patristic Insights

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Protopresbyter Dr Doru Costache

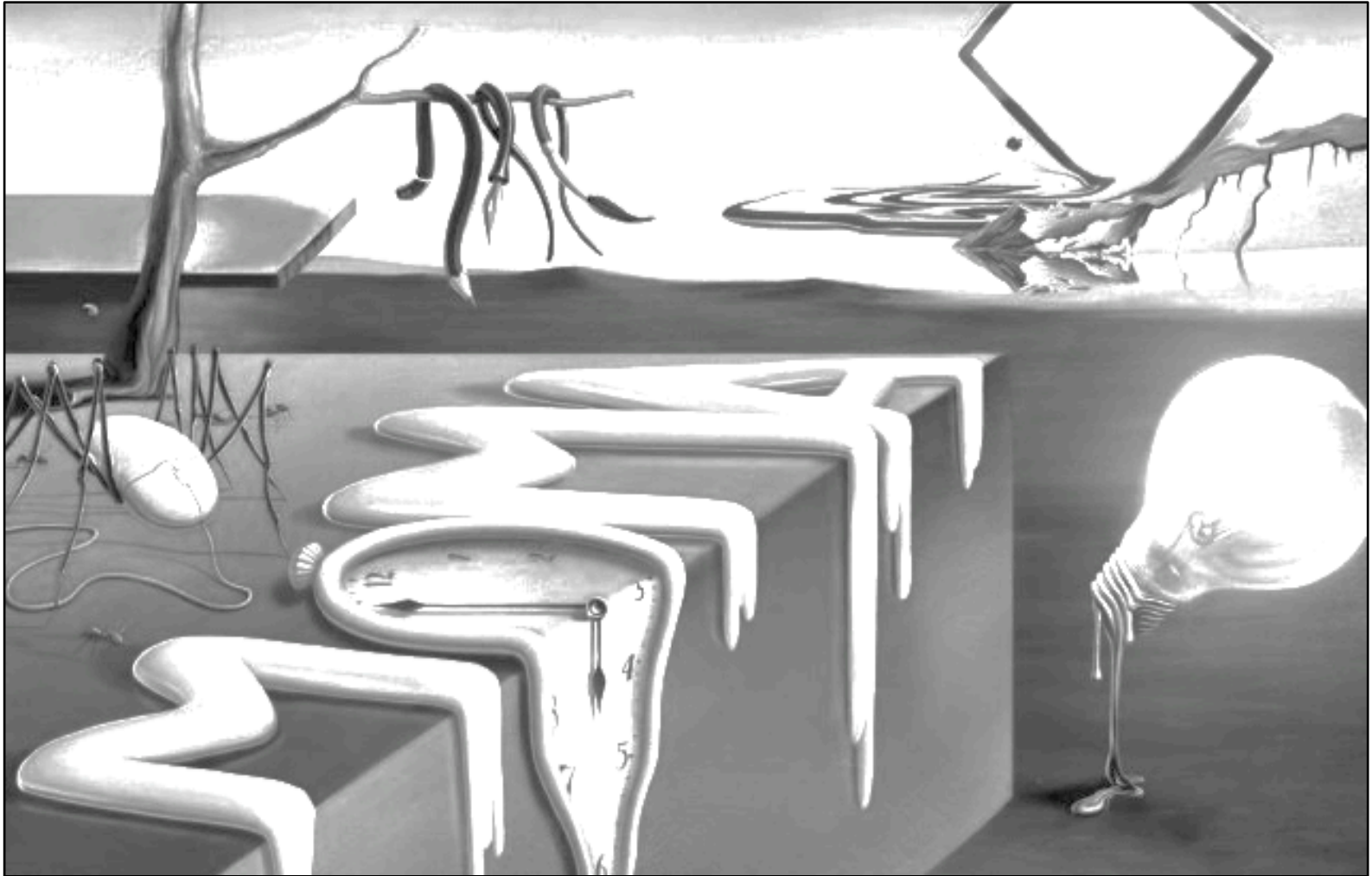
<http://www.sagotc.edu.au>

<http://sagotc.academia.edu/DoruCostache>

Science and Theology: Patristic Insights

- The phrase “science and theology/religion” bears various connotations
 - The warfare theory: science and religion/theology are antagonistic by nature and their rapports consist in their attempts to annihilate one another (e.g. fundamentalist scientists, scientific creationists)
 - The concordist theory: science and religion/theology are compatible and can be harmonised by way of syntheses (e.g. natural theology, scientology)
 - The contemporary field called science and religion/theology: knowing each other’s competences and limitations, and seeking to accomplish a holistic worldview where there is room for the contribution of each field (e.g. interdisciplinarity, transdisciplinarity)
- My approach is shaped by my background in patristic studies (=the study of the Church Fathers and Mothers, and their works)
- N.B. Whilst I do not promise any easy fix, I will undertake to offer data that will assist you in making up your own minds

Science and Theology: Western Landmarks



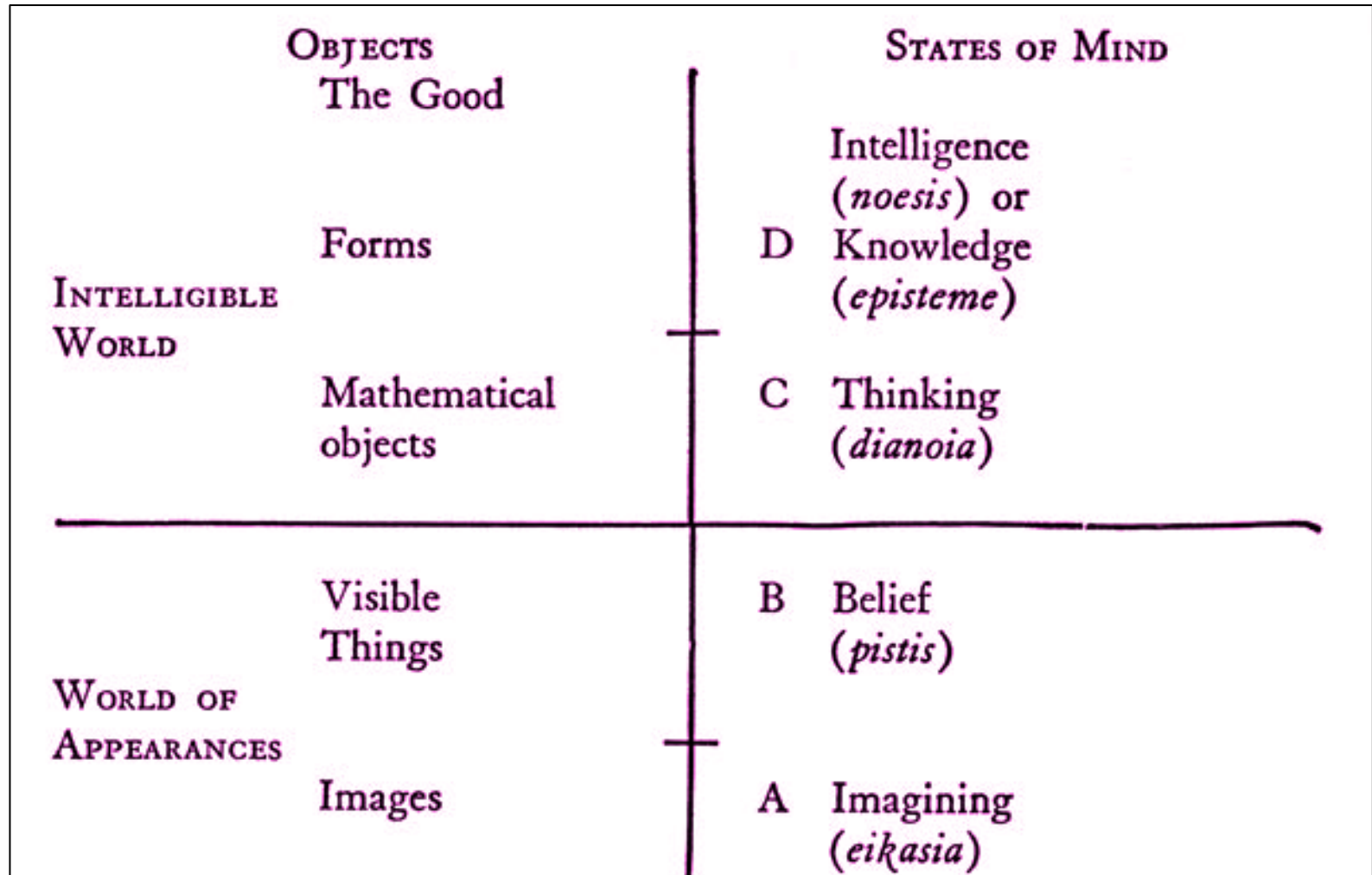
Science and Theology: Western Landmarks

- The beginning of modernity coincides with the emergence of a totally new cultural phenomenon – a whole culture based on secular (=what matters is this world only and our history in the making), materialist (=matter is the only existing substance), naturalist (=there are no other layers of reality other than nature) and agnostic (=the only knowledge possible is reached through empiric means; no metaphysics is possible) presuppositions, with an obvious atheistic penchant
- Although individuals and trends of similar ideological preferences existed before, no other culture in history has ever presented these features as the dominants of its constitution
- The emergence of this culture, doubled by various anti-traditional trends in society, made impossible to avoid the warfare of science and religion

Science and Theology: Western Landmarks

- Given its antagonistic makeup, the emergent modern culture attacked, both implicitly and openly, the existing Christian worldview
 - The supernaturalist paradigm of the high middle ages replaced by naturalism
 - The closed world, hierarchically ordered, replaced by the infinite universe
 - Faith replaced by theory and experiment
 - Ethical values and axiological assessments replaced by quantitative norms
- Whilst the early reaction of the Western Churches and their theologians was unwarranted insofar as it consisted in persecuting the scientists (e.g. Galileo) and prohibiting the scientific quest for knowledge (e.g. geology, evolutionary biology), still there was something worthwhile in that reaction – an attempt to preserve the world of values, including ethical and spiritual, without which humankind collapses in depression and violence → contemporary society, which exhibits precisely these features, is the result of the abandonment of such values

Science and Theology: Classical Landmarks



Science and Theology: Classical Landmarks

- The classical culture of antiquity was characterised by holism, an encompassing worldview where there was room for many layers of reality and a wide range of perceptions
- The classical “curriculum” of Plato, Aristotle and the Stoics proceeded according to a three-stage pattern (terms vary): ethics (the study of the values) – physics (the study of nature) – epoptics (the study of the loftier realities; metaphysics)
- Both the holistic worldview and the three-stage pattern have been inherited by the early Christians and developed throughout the Byzantine era → as inheritors of this holistic culture, modern Orthodox should not be entrapped by the parameters of Western antagonisms (reason vs. faith, science vs. religion, creationism vs. evolutionism)
- A possible shape of the Orthodox way: developing a holistic worldview where reality is perceived through various lenses, e.g. scientific, ethical and theological

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- The early Church Fathers and Mothers exhibited a wide range of attitudes toward culture in general, and science and philosophy in particular. Inheriting the classical paradigm, they integrated the “outer wisdom” within a worldview based on the apostolic kerygma, a system where the exploration and/or contemplation of nature began with the scientific approach and continued with ethical and doxological inferences
- Typical for the patristic approach is the *Hexaemeron* of St Basil the Great, where the cosmos is explored scientifically (description of the phenomena) and interpreted scripturally (all that are, are created by God and move according to the divine wisdom), followed by inferences envisaging the Christian faith and life (the world perceived as a divine teaching-ground) and doxology (the cosmos points to its Creator and extolls Him, inviting us to follow suit)

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- Whilst separating the scientific enquiry from any atheistic entanglements and heavily criticising atheism, a series of Church Fathers (e.g. Clement the Alexandrine, St Athanasius, St Basil, St Gregory of Nyssa, St Maximus, St Gregory Palamas) and Mothers (e.g. St Macrina the Young) manifested the capacity of integrating the scientific discourse within the Christian worldview
- What made this achievement possible? The awareness that reality can be explored from various perspectives (scientific, ethical, doxological) which neither overlap nor eliminate one another. A vision of complementarity...
- A possible patristic-like approach today would consist in
 - Respecting the autonomy of the scientific exploration
 - Separating genuine science from the parasitical ideologies that take advantage of it
 - Taking the scientific description of reality as a first stage toward interpreting reality from a theological vantage point, a process that culminates in spiritual formation and doxology

Recommended Readings

- For the complex processes related to the emergence of modern cosmology:
 - Koyré, Alexandre. *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1957.
- For the classical and patristic engagements with science:
 - Pelikan, Jaroslav. *What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem? Timaeus and Genesis in Counterpoint*. Jerome Lectures 21. The University of Michigan Press, 1997.
 - Pelikan, Jaroslav. *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993.
 - Wallace-Hadrill, D. S. *The Greek Patristic View of Nature*. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press and Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1968.
- Some of my articles on the patristic approaches to science:
 - 'Christian Worldview: Understandings from St Basil the Great'. In: D. Costache and P. Kariatlis, eds., *Cappadocian Legacy: A Critical Appraisal*. Sydney: St Andrew's Orthodox Press, 2013
 - 'Making Sense of the World: Theology and Science in St Gregory of Nyssa's *An Apology for the Hexaemeron*'. *Phronema* 28:1 (2013) 1-29.
 - 'The Transdisciplinary Carats of Patristic Byzantine Tradition'. *Transdisciplinary Journal of Engineering & Science* 4 (2013) 131-40.