

AN ORTHODOX PERSPECTIVE OF

NATURE, MAN, AND GOD

Paulos Mar Gregorios

Contents

Introduction

1. The Sources, Norms and Limits of Christian Understanding-- Some Methodological Considerations

- a) Epinoia or the Power of Conception and Creativity
- b) Evil, Sin and Error
- c) Life in the Community of the Spirit-- Participation in the Living Tradition of Christ

2. The Creation-- Contingent, Extended, Dynamic

- a) The Nature of Matter
- b) The Unity and Inter-relatedness of the Universe
- c) The nature of time

3. Man's Place in the Universe

- a) The concept of Adam
- b) Man as the Crown of Creation
- c) Man as co-creator with God

4. God and the Universe

5. Practical Implications

Notes

Introduction

Nature is a concept of Indo-Hellenic origin, which the authentic Christian tradition finds problematic. If it refers to "all things" (*ta panta*) constituting a system, a unity, with a particular structure and order, then man is essentially a part of that system; if it is interpreted in a non-inclusive way, it would have to be qualified as sub-human nature, or non-human nature or nature minus humankind.

If the assumption is that nature is something which exists by itself (naturally) as distinct from human culture, the authentic Christian tradition must again object. The creation is not self-

generating or non-contingent. It does not have autousia or self-existence. Only the Creator has such autousia.

To put it rather provocatively, nature does not exist; only the creation exists. Nature is a false concept, bound to mislead. The sooner we abandon it, the less exposed we will be to erroneous thinking.

The creation (*ktisis*) includes humanity. To talk of the creation minus man is absurd. We do not speak of man's relation to the creation, as if they were two separate realities. The most we can do is to speak of man's place in creation and his relation to the rest of it in terms of that place.

The creation, in Orthodox thinking, is a dynamic entity, not a work that was completed in six days, as the Genesis account of it is sometimes interpreted. It is a process for which the *arche* or source is the creative *energeia* of God. Its destiny or *telos* is also given in the creative act of the divine *energeia*. That same *energeia* provides the dynamic necessary for it to move from *arche* to *telos*, from inception to perfection, from beginning to fulfillment. Thus the creation has no self-existence. The *energeia* of God is its source, goal and dynamic.

How is creation to be understood, and what is the role of man in it? In answering these two questions, this paper resorts to a certain amount of necessary speculation based on the Patristic heritage which shaped the classical Christian tradition. It relies heavily on Gregory of Nyssa (ca.331-389 AD), the only philosophical theologian of the undivided Christian Church who has dealt with these themes in any profound way and who is acceptable to the authentic tradition (Origen is not accepted; Augustine of Hippo and Maximus the Confessor are rejected by my particular tradition).

1. The Sources, Norms, and Limits of Christian Understanding-- Some Methodological Considerations

a) Epinoia or the Power of Conception and Creativity

Human beings are endowed with the capacity to conceptualize and to create. Gregory of Nyssa calls this capacity epinoia. Sense-impressions are the raw material through which the human mind informs itself. The nature of the mind enables structures and limits the information intake. It is the faculty of epinoia, which makes understanding possible, which enables man to imagine and to create the marvels of music and the arts, of architecture and technology. Man's relation to his environment is shaped by this ability to understand and to engineer.

Theoretical understanding, however, cannot be divorced from action. The head and the hands have to be coordinated, and language serves that coordination. Gregory of Nyssa regards the three elements-- head, tongue, and hands or understanding, language and action-- as essential to man's proper relationship to his environment. Epinoia, or the power of conception and creativity, has to do with all three, as well as with their co-ordination.

b) Evil, Sin, and Error

The epinoia, however, is not free from error. It is capable of creating chimaeras, of conceiving things, which do not and cannot exist. The root of the error is in sin. Because of sin, man is no longer in the state in which he was created. By a primordial act of evil, the human mind became incapable of knowing the truth. The possibility of error lurks behind every conception of truth. The world as we experience it is also shaped by this admixture of error in the epinoia, itself caused by the admixture of evil in the human being which was created as good, but is now capable of evil as well as good.

True understanding therefore demands release from this admixture of evil. Only as the human person is progressively liberated from the evil does his epinoia begin to function, as it should. All three-- understanding, language and action-- are affected by the admixture of evil. Only through the transformation of his being can the human person arrive at error-free understanding, language and action. This transformation is ultimately effected through the process of death and resurrection, but that process can begin already here, through participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, through life in the Community of the Spirit.

c) Life in the Community of the Spirit-- Participation in the Living Tradition of Christ

The community of the Church has its own understanding, language and action, which always transcends the rational. No final conceptual apprehension of reality is available to the community or to any of its participants. The best mode of apprehension and expression is the Eucharistic act. All dualities are transcended in this act of union between the Creator and the creation, through participation in Jesus Christ the incarnate. Time and space are also transcended in this act, where eternity breaks into time and transforms it; where union is achieved with all the saints in space and time; where matter is the bearer of the spirit, the Bread of Life; where God, man and the creation are united in one act of mutual self-giving; where the creation is offered up to God in self-offering and where God offers himself to the creation through the body and the blood; where the world is transfigured to bear witness to the glory of God; where the subject-object dichotomy is overcome in the act where the offering, the offerer and the one to whom the offering is made are united in love; where reason and the language of reason merge into the act of love; where memory and hope bring the past and the future together into the single moment of present eternity....

This kind of theological language baffles and at times infuriates the scientific observer, for it refuses to be bound by the canons of ordinary speech. But both rite and symbol transcend ordinary speech. What follows is an attempt to translate into prose some insights about the nature of the creation characteristic of this strange community of the Spirit.

2. The Creation-- Contingent, Extended, Dynamic

a) The Nature of Matter

Gregory of Nyssa made it very clear that matter as such is an abstraction, which we never encounter. What we see is matter with qualities, the elements with their atomic structure. Gregory knew nothing of the sub-atomic world of particles; what he says about matter as abstraction applies at the macro-level of atomic molecular matter.

But Gregory never made the mistake of saying that the universe is composed of matter in motion. Nor did he regard matter as an inert vehicle for its qualities. In fact, he insisted that minus qualities matter is nothing, that it has no existence apart from the qualities. Different forms of matter are but different confluence of qualities.

He went one step further insisting that matter is nothing but energy-- God's creative energy, moving dynamically from one form to another. The basis of matter is energy, the coming together of God's will that it exists, and God's word which brings it into existence. Thus God's will and word, which is the *energeia* of God, is the basis of matter. Matter is the manifestation of God's *energeia*, contingent upon his will and word, dynamic and changing.

Today with our knowledge of the sub-atomic world, we can go further. We can confirm Gregory's insight that the sub-atomic particles which constitute matter are a dynamic network of energy events continuously changing, forming dissolving, re-forming. There are no basic building-blocks, no solid entities occupying an absolute space. Energy and mass are interchangeable in an orderly way ($E = MC^2$). We cannot explain "nature" in terms of "elementary particles" and their primary qualities. The mechanistic picture of the universe popularized by 17th century science belongs to the museum of antiquity. Matter-in-motion is no longer an adequate or tenable explanation of the nature of the universe.

b) The Unity and Inter-relatedness of the Universe

Most of our rational thought relies too heavily on the division of the universe into classes and species, into epochs and ages, into centuries and events, into separate objects and separate happenings. We find this division helpful and necessary. But usefulness is no guarantee of truth; the pragmatic criterion so central to modern science is at best a questionable test of truth.

What we have, more clearly in the sub-atomic world and less obviously in the macro world, is an interaction between the observing system and the observed system-- not absolute knowledge of an independent object. In relation to the subatomic world, however, the observing system (that is ourselves with our experimental apparatus) is always understood in terms of classical physics, while the observed system has to be understood at the level of quantum and relativity theories which do not fit into classical physics. It is only in terms of the latter that the observer-observed

dichotomy can be maintained. At the sub-atomic level, the observed and the observer are united in one interlocking system.

In an area where his technical knowledge is severely limited, the theologian must resort to the authority of the scientist. A recent article by David Bohm puts it this way:"

“One is led to a new notion of unbroken wholeness which denies the classical idea of analyzability of the world into separately and independently existing parts.... We have reserved the usual classical notion that the independent ‘elementary parts’ of the world are the fundamental reality, and that the various systems are merely particular contingent forms and arrangements of these parts. Rather, we say that inseparable quantum inter-connectedness of the whole universe is the fundamental reality, and that relatively independently behaving parts are merely particular and contingent forms within this whole.”¹

What we regard as solid, stable, material objects with their apparently objective existence, dissolve, at the subatomic level, into waves of probabilities, which are primarily patterns of inter-connections. We cannot observe nature as an object. If Heisenberg is right, "what we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning".² When our experimental arrangement is modified, the data yielded are also different. The observer thus becomes participator in the reality which he is measuring, and he can never know how that reality appears apart from his own participation, or the participation of someone else.

The idea of an ‘objective world’ independent of man has thus to be abandoned; there are no two realities called ‘man’ and ‘nature’ which can somehow be separately observed,

Nor can we any longer hold space and time as separate realities. Space-time, matter-energy, particle-wave, rest-motion-- all these dualisms of classical Physics also disintegrate at the sub-atomic level. Judging from literature on the subject, even the concepts of existence and non-existence seem to be problematic. Is Robert Oppenheimer right when he says:

“If we ask, for instance, whether the position of the electron remains the same, we must say ‘no’; if we ask whether the electron’s position changes with time, we must say ‘no’; if we ask whether it is in motion, we must say ‘no’”.³

If he is right, then it is no longer right to say that everything is in perpetual change. Polar opposites like permanence and change, existence and non-existence, seem to co-exist, and even the most dialectical ordinary language fails to do justice to the complex inter-locking web that is our universe. The time-honored principles of non-contradiction and the excluded middle fade into insignificance as being of use in only a very limited area of discourse.

What emerges is one universe, with man inextricably interlocked within that system. It is this notion of the creation as one inter-related web of space and time as merely aspects of it and not

any kind of medium or vessel in which realities exist, which is affirmed by the authentic Christian tradition (which some wrongly insist on calling the Orthodox tradition). The whole creation is a single unit, with space and time as merely cognates within it. According to this authentic tradition, it is absurd to ask questions about ‘the time before creation’, for time begins with creation. Since the beginning of creation is also the beginning of time, there is no time before that beginning.

Modern Physics puts a couple of questions to the classical Christian tradition. These relate to change and extension. Gregory of Nyssa would insist, for example, that change and extension are the essential characteristics of the created order, that everything in space-time is extended or distended, and that everything is continuously changing. The notions of change and extension can no longer be held in this absolute manner in the sub-atomic world, though even the micro entities called particle-waves have their own probabilities of location and momentum. This means simply that the notions of extension (*diastema*) and change (*trope*) in the classical Christian understanding of creation have to be suitably modified in order to accommodate the new insights of nuclear physics (relativity and quantum theories).

But the unity and inter-relatedness of the cosmos as affirmed in the classical Christian tradition is confirmed by the revolutionary new hypotheses of relativity and quantum physics. Man is inseparable from that unity. There is no nature as ‘creation minus man’. We will deal with the place of man in creation in the next section.

c) The Nature of Time

While it is true that modern physics does not permit the notion of time as a separate entity in which events occur, but sees it merely as a dimension of reality, the fact remains that we human beings experience time in a peculiar way. This peculiar way is only tangentially by the relativity understanding of time as one dimension of a four dimensional reality.

To put it very bluntly, we experience time as death, and not only in the sense that every moment of time brings death closer, that every tick of the clock is the football of approaching death. We experience time as death in another way. Every moment is born dead for by time we are able to say ‘now’, the ‘now’ has gone and become the ‘then’ of the past. The moment called the present is, from our perspective, a fleeting point of intersection between two streams, the stream of the future passing over into that of the past. We can hold on to the past by ‘memory’ and the future by ‘hope’, as Gregory of Nyssa has said. But there is no way to hold on to the present. It flees. As Augustine said, it sweeps us away and offers us no foothold to save ourselves from its flow.

Time is death for matter, too. If Carnot’s Second Law of Thermodynamics still holds, then everything moves towards the stable equilibrium called death. ‘When a closed system containing a large number of molecules is left to itself, it assumes a state of maximum entropy; that is, it becomes progressively less ordered.’

But life defies death, at least for a while. It creates ever more ordered systems, culminating in the evolution of the human brain, the most centered and complex system of organization of molecules that we know. It has been achieved through death and reproduction, through the process of a bio-cultural evolution that has been going on for at least 10,000 years of known cultural history.

Time is the arena where this struggle between death and life goes on continuously. Death disintegrates, life organizes. But life here, in our time, is always ultimately subject to death.

The Christian understanding of creation insists that this state of affairs is not final, that death came late into the cosmos, on the trail of the other enemy, sin. The present creation, or the creation as we presently experience it, subject to time-as-death, good-being always mixed with evil-non-being which drags it into the jaws of death, is to be liberated from both evil and death. This is a basic affirmation of the authentic Christian tradition. 'Nature', red in tooth and claw, is not the last word. Sin is not the last word. Neither is death, nor Carnot's Second Law.

Life has triumphed over death, good over evil, being over non-being, in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Therefore we affirm our hope in a new heaven and a new earth, where time itself is transformed into an aeon where there is neither death, nor, consequently, birth or marriage. But we acknowledge that as Christians we do not know how this will come about. The nature of creation as we now experience it is intimately bound up with our experience of death, but in our Christian understanding of creation, we do not take the 'given' as somehow final. We do not settle into this death bound sin-infested 'natural order' as if it were the final reality. Nor can we regard knowledge, both theoretical and operational, of that present natural order as somehow the noblest of pursuits. Science and technology which relate primarily to the knowledge of this decaying order of the present world, have their value in terms of making even this sin-infested world show forth the glory of God. But our hope negates this world which science studies, for we wait for a new heaven and a new earth where righteousness dwells, from which evil and death have been banished.

Not that the new heaven and the new earth are totally discontinuous with the present ones. Whatever meaning the present world has comes from that element of continuity with the coming world. Here we Christians differ from the Hindu Vedantin who denies any significance whatsoever to the present time-world. For us, its significance derives from the significance it will have in the new.

3. Man's Place in the Universe

This transcendent value of the present universe in terms of its relation to the coming one is a value which man is responsible for maintaining. Where that value is denied, as it was in the post-17th century atmosphere of secularization, what results is a lack of respect for the creation. As Richard Schelegel put it:

"With no transcendent value postulated for nature, men were free to act on a philosophy of exploitation of the apparent great machine within which they lived. The same cosmology that allowed this license also gave, thanks to the validity of the Newtonian physics, a powerful weapon for constructing devices for the control of nature. Further, although man was of the world, he also stood apart from the scheme; for his intellectual and spiritual life were not to be related to the inanimate mechanisms of the natural world generally..... Man's own welfare, therefore, as conceived in the light of his wants and powers, could in good conscience be furthered by any desired use of nature. It was an ultimate sadness that man was a puny and probably transitory phenomenon, without meaning in the great surrounding universe; but, also, he could display his ascendancy on earth, and with a bit of good fortune, perhaps enjoy at least the major part of this life." ⁴

What was necessary for the development of modern science was not so much the Christian matrix as the denial of it in post-17th century secularization in Europe. It was only by denying the transcendent significance of the present universe, and by isolating himself from it, so that value attached only to himself and his desire, that man was able to brace himself for the thoughtless exploration and exploitation of that universe. Man's making the universe an object was the consequence of a double transformation in the European mind-- the denial of any transcendent significance to the universe, thereby making himself the subject and the universe the object.

The authentic Christian tradition calls in question both attitudes. The universe, though subject to death, has relation to the new heaven and the new earth, and so has transcendent significance; man is an integral part of that universe, and cannot stand outside of it, making himself the subject and it the object. The universe is not an object, nor is it made up of particular and independent objects. Man is not merely a resident in the universe, surrounded by different objects which he is free to manipulate. He is an inextricable part of that universe, and has emerged from within it.

The Christian tradition holds to three fundamental lines of thought about man's place in the universe:

a) The concept of Adam

Adam means that which came out of Adama, the earth. His body has the same components as the earth. In fact, all living beings have bodies composed of the same elements as found in the earth. Man shares this aspect of his being with animals, plants and inorganic matter. "The first man is of the earth-- earthy", as St. Paul put it.

b) Man as the Crown of Creation

The Tradition accepted an elementary form of the doctrine of evolution thirteen centuries before Charles Darwin. Gregory of Nyssa in 4th century held the view that the same force of creation, operating in inorganic matter, shaped the plant world or vegetative sphere of life, the animal world or the bio-sphere of life, and the human world. He went further to say that the human body incorporates all the lower worlds-- the animal and the vegetative elements exist and operate idea, he held that man in a sense recapitulates and represents the whole universe, that in man the cosmos consciously responds to the Creator.

“Scripture informs us that the Deity proceeded by a sort of graduated and ordered advance to creation of man. After the foundations of the universe were laid, as the history records, man did not appear on the earth at once, but creation of the brutes precede him, and the plants precede them. Thereby Scripture shows that the forces of life blended with bodily nature according to a gradation, first it infused itself into insensate nature, and in continuation of this advanced into the sentient world, and then ascended to intelligent and rational beings.”⁵

c) Man as co-creator with God

Man, as part of creation, is not an object for the cosmic forces to mould at their will. He is free. This means that he is not a passive subject, acted upon by the universe, but is capable of understanding and acting upon the universe. This is what the Tradition means when it speaks about apatheia as freedom. Patheia or passion is, paradoxically, passive. It means being acted upon and carried away by forces. Apatheia is active. It is not apathy, but a heroic refusal to be passive. If God is Creator, and man is made in his image, has man also to be in some sense a creator? He expresses this creativity by shaping himself, his society and his environment. This is his freedom-- limited, but real. Science and technology can be instruments in the exercise of this freedom-- freedom which ensues in creating of the good, the struggling against evil, overcoming the enslaving passions, responding in Eucharistic thanksgiving to the Creator.

Any understanding of “nature” must then take into account these three elements:

1. Man’s participation in “nature” as integral to it;
2. Man’s representation of “nature” as its priest, so to speak; and
3. Man’s transformation of “nature” to conform it to the good.

4. God and the Universe

The relation between God and the universe cannot be grasped conceptually as long as one of the two terms-- God-- eludes the conceptual grasp. The tradition insists, however, that God is neither “beyond the universe”, nor “contained in it”. Not contained, for that which is contained would be

finite; not beyond, for then there would be a boundary between God and the universe which would make both God and universe finite since bounded.

Gregory of Nyssa holds the following principles regarding the God-universe relation.

- The universe subsists on and participates in God's *energeia*, but its "is-ness" is not of the same order as God's "is-ness", and therefore the relationship cannot be defined in terms of any relationship of two entities with our kind of being.
- From our side, there is a *diastema* or gap between the universe and God, but from God's side there is none. The gap is experienced by us in many ways. One of these is that the rational understanding can travel through the sequential chain of the inter-connected cosmos, but never to the 'is-ness' of the One on whom it is contingent. Rational knowledge does not get outside the created universe.
- The question about God's existence is meaningless, since every created 'is-ness' is contingent upon the uncreated 'is-ness' of God. Nothing is, except in contingent relation to God's 'is-ness'.
- Even the question whether God and the world are two realities is pointless. This does not mean that God is the same as universe. But it does mean that God is not 'outside' or 'beyond' the universe, which would logically mean that the universe is outside God, which means that God has a boundary with an inside and outside. If God and world were two realities, then God plus world would be more than God. There cannot be anything like God plus something else. Hence we must abandon the notion that God and world are two realities.

5. *Practical Implications*

1. *Nature* terminology is misleading, since it separates man from the rest of the universe, attributing transcendent value only to man and not to universe. This terminology is better abandoned. *Creation* is the Christian word. If a secular word is needed, it is best to use *universe*.
2. Man does not exist apart from the universe, nor does the universe as known by science exist apart from man. Humanity and the universe are interlocked parts of a single system. That system cannot be made into an object without distortion. It is like humanity's body, not like an object outside humanity.
3. Man deals with this universe not in one way, but in several. Science technology offers one way, but it is by no means exhaustive. Three ways can be envisaged:
 - Dealing with it to create the good through understanding and manipulation, but without idolizing it or being totally absorbed in it;
 - Caring for it as one cares for the body, or as a priest cares for his people, and developing it; and

- Dealing with it through symbol and ritual to transcend it and to relate oneself to the mystery of the Creator whose energy constitutes it.

These three ways are complementary and not exclusive of each other. All three are necessary. Only a combination of the three can make us fully human. Even the Antonine monks in the Egyptian desert knew it. They combined working with their hands, usually, weaving baskets, caring for the animals, and sacramental worship. Human culture must also provide for all three approaches to 'nature'.

Notes

1. D. Bohm and B. Hiely, "On the Intuitive Understanding of Non locality as Implied by Quantum Theory", in *Foundations of Physics* Vol. 5 (1975).

2. Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy* (London, 1963) p. 57.

3. J. R. Oppenheimer, *Science and the Common Understanding* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954) pp. 42-43.

4. H. R. Schlegel, "Quantum Physics and Human Purpose", in *Zygon* (8), December 1973, pp. 200 ff.

5. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the resurrection*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series Two, Vol. V: 441 B. *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. 46-60 A.

(From: *Anticipation*, No. 25, Jan. 1979, pp. 64-68)