

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 22 | Issue 5

Article 2

12-1-2005

God and Physical Cosmology

Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk and Slutsk

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Filaret of Minsk and Slutsk, Metropolitan (2005) "God and Physical Cosmology," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 5 , Article 2.

DOI: 10.5840/faithphil200522516

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol22/iss5/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

GOD AND PHYSICAL COSMOLOGY

Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk and Slutsk

As the dialogue between science and religion has grown more robust, Christians have been led to more nuanced ways of thinking about the connections between these two modes of inquiry. This essay focuses on exploring various deficiencies in naturalistic conceptions of the cosmos, and further exploring how Eastern Orthodox theology provides a more encompassing picture of human beings and their place in the cosmos.

I. Dialogue between science and theology

Our aim in this volume is to exchange views on the general theme of God and Physical Cosmology. It is needless to say how important and relevant the dialogue between Christian theology, philosophical research and scientific thought is in our time. This dialogue has been long under way. Our task is to develop it, involving new participants, proposing new approaches and taking into account the latest philosophical and scientific findings.

The intellectual history of the 20th century has vividly shown that all radical schemes setting religion and science against each other have become out of date. Certainly there is still a difference in the methods employed in scientific research and theological thinking. There are, however, striking parallels that can be seen between modern theories proposed by fundamental science and the theological vision of the universe. While it is difficult to speak about any convergence of interpretations, the very existence of common ground compels theologians and scientists to seek and discuss ways towards mutual understanding and intellectual cooperation.¹

In order to make this cooperation fruitful, it is necessary to set forth clearly the Christian view of nature and origin of the world as it has developed in church tradition. In my presentation I will speak about the fundamental assertions on theological cosmology in its Eastern Orthodox understanding.

II. Origin of the world

The starting point here is the ontological dualism of the created and the uncreated. The world is a created entity; it was created by God, the Creator "from nothing" (*ex nihilo*). This means that the world does not have a foundation of its own as it hangs, so to speak, over the abyss of non-existence.

At the same time the world does exist. Moreover, as the meaning of the Greek word *cosmos* suggests, the world is "order" and "beauty." Precisely



these qualities of physical orderliness and esthetic proportionality indicate that the world's existence is not accidental or imaginable but completed in a certain sense and therefore authentic.

The same qualities point to a certain Origin or Source transcending the existence of the world itself, that is, to the Cause that builds the world. To be a proportionate whole the world has to have its Builder who is both Architect and Artist (Hebrews 11:10).

The Christian teaching on the creation however draws only an indirect analogy with creativity as known to us from human experience. Indeed, a human being creates something from materials available to him. Besides, the creative action of a human being, however free and unforced, still depends on the context, including the material itself since a human being is already inside the world.

It is quite a different matter when we speak about a creative action of God. God the Creator does not have any material outside Himself because "before" the creation there was nothing but God Himself. "Nothing" from which God creates is of an absolute nature. But God does not create from Himself either, otherwise what He creates would be divine. Finally, God creates absolutely freely, with nothing either "outside" or "inside" Himself forcing Him to create a different, new entity.

This conception means that it is only the will of God the Creator that causes the creation and founds the created existence. Ontologically God and the world are radically separate, so much so that the Church Fathers refuse to use the term "existence" at the same time for God and the creation. At the same time, the bond between God and the world is extremely strong, for the world is called from non-existence by God's will, which is immutable. In this sense, theologically, the "support" of the world is more solid than any "natural law," the "solidity" of which itself needs to be theoretically substantiated.

III. Non-Christian conceptions of the world

The theological conception of the origin of the world has a number of important implications. First of all, it should be said that it differs considerably from both the ancient, pre-Christian, cosmology and the scientism of the Modern Time. This applies first of all to the ideas of the self-sufficiency and completeness of the world, or rather, to the interpretations of these ideas.

For the ancient Greeks, the world was essentially an orderly whole. Even God cannot transgress the laws of proportion and justice by which the beautiful and harmonious cosmos lives. As subject to the highest ontological necessity this cosmos is complete. There is no room in it for freedom or chance. The world as law is also a source of moral law.²

For the so-called scientific worldview of the Modern Time, the world is first of all nature, which is primary with regard to man. Nature is governed by laws inherent in it and generates by these laws the human being as one of the natural phenomena. At the same time, man is extremely small in the face of the physical cosmos. The rationality of nature is precisely what the human being is called to come to know as the ultimate truth of the world. The human being is doomed to the endless exploration of nature as infinitely exceeding them.

In scientism, there is no ethical dimension at all. As an object of scientific research and exploration the world, in Pushkin's words, is "indifferent nature." A moral concern emerges only when results of scientific research begin to threaten the very nature and humanity. It is only in the 20th century that science has begun to realize how important and even decisive the "human factor" is for the physical world (the role of observer, the anthropic principle, etc.).

In other words, both ancient and new European cosmologies are monistic. For them the world is complete and presents itself to man not only as something given but also as the ultimate necessity. Exploring and transforming the world as they can, human beings act within the rational necessity of nature. (One cannot help recalling here the Marxist definition of freedom as comprehended necessity.)

IV. Principle of free will

It should be stated that from the theological point of view, too, the world was completed in the creation. "And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which God created and made." (Gen. 2:2)

The Creator "rested from his work." It means that the created world received certain autonomy, that is, an opportunity for existing as a different entity distinct from the divine entity and at the same time authentic.

On the other hand however, it can be said that the completion of the world was "incomplete," while its autonomy was limited. Indeed, the crown of the creation is man, a "different god." It was to man as God's special creation that God entrusted the physical cosmos and the sphere of biological life. The created world is given freedom, but it is human freedom.

The world itself comes into existence as a result of a dynamic creative action, and this dynamic is laid down in the creation. It is not the dynamic of an evolving "indifferent nature," but the dynamic of godlike human personalities.

If the laws of the world are determined by the Creator's will, and the creation is completed when the world is given to "another creator," man, to rule, then the "cosmic nature" of the world – the order and beauty laid down by the Creator – is teleological, and conforms to the goal. This goal is not an ultimate necessity of cosmological law but the image of divine perfection, which does not work automatically but is offered free to man.

Existence as created by the free will of the Creator remains dependent existence. The created world however is dependent not only because it is "incomplete" nor because the creation continues after the initial act of creation. It is a different form of dependence since, being generated by God's free will, the world is bound up with freedom: it carries in itself the principle of free will. (In this case it can be said, in opposition to the Marxist formula whereby freedom is the comprehended necessity of natural laws, that freedom itself is necessity related to the necessity of natural laws as complementary.)

V. World for man

Therefore, Christian cosmology not only comprehends the world as created by God and in a certain sense as the physical cosmos independent of God, but also as the world created for human beings. The Creator introduced to the world as a whole the principle of will in parallel with the principle of natural order.

The physical world is the body of the human being and humanity. And the human being as only a part of the cosmic world physically and biologically is at the same time "a whole in the world." Moreover, the human being is the principle of the integrity of the world.

If the so-called "anthropic principle" is to be interpreted theologically, it should be said that it essentially lies not at all in the fact that there are external physical parameters in the universe that conform to the life of human species. On the contrary, man himself as created in the image of God the Creator is the "cause" of the physical parameters of the world created as "his world" and "his body."

The stability of the natural cosmos should also be viewed from the perspective of the "principle of will" existing in the world. Accordingly, the world is such that the human will cannot violate its natural laws, on the one hand. But on the other hand, we can well say today that man exploring the world with the help of technology has become a threat to this stability, at least within the bounds of the Earth. This threat indicates that "the principle of will" is more than real. The knowledge of the universal structures and laws on macro and micro levels can turn into a global disaster if the will of man as "the master of the world" is not directed to achieving "the image of perfection" offered to man by his Creator (cf.: James 1:17; Colossians 3:14; John 15:11).

On the basis of the above, it is possible to draw the conclusion that the conception of man as an orderly psychosomatic being is insufficient, and moreover, essentially wrong. The physical cosmos as a complete and in some sense self-sufficient whole cannot be viewed in isolation from its "human dimension."

Characteristically, the Eastern Fathers of the Church, reflecting on the diversity of aspects, things and creatures which God created the world, rejected the Platonic static conception of the ideas. They spoke about the dynamic divine ideas-volitions through which God creates all that is. The principle of dynamism is present even in the creation from nothing of the pre-human world. The created existence is built in accordance with the divine paradigms of the Creator who designs it. There are no eternal impersonal laws. If the structures of the physical world discovered by scientists were the ultimate foundation and truth of its existence, they should be named divine. But in this case it should be admitted that this divinity would be weak and therefore false because it easily yields to corruption and destruction brought on by one of the fragments of the world itself, which is man.

VI. Personhood and history

Here we come to a subject which has no direct bearing on cosmology but

which cannot be avoided in a discussion on God as the Creator of the world. It is the theme of evil and therefore salvation from evil.

If the physical world is well ordered and beautiful, that is good, it means the source of destruction corrupting this orderliness and beauty should be sought for outside the natural laws. Otherwise we will have to admit that there is a virus affecting the physical-mathematical harmony itself. Then we have to assume that the evolution of the world is a result and manifestation of the struggle between the two principles: the good principle seeking harmony and the evil principle abusing natural processes to make chaos prevail.

Physicists will argue that they will not presume to speak about some "evil principle" but only about the processes of entropy. To this a theologian or a philosopher will argue that the natural processes themselves are impossible to explain on the basis of the same natural processes. Scientism as an ultimate generalization of scientific data and hypotheses leads to the necessity of creating a worldview "ascending" from natural science which must adopt some ultimate foundations as axioms. But such foundations cannot be found within a scientific methodology.

The discrepancy between the methodology of natural science and the theological-philosophical approach becomes most vivid in the interpretation of time. Physical time, that is natural and impersonal time, has little in common with "human," that is existential, time. Their commonality is limited to the "time of the human body," for this body, both individual and cosmic, is at the same time a physical (natural) body and a personal body, that is a body which is spiritual in its essence.

We encounter a similar problem in dealing not with the individual living today but with the whole humanity unthinkable without past and future generations. The existential time of humanity is history. Historical time is once again parallel to the physical and biological evolution of the world. An essential difference between the two qualities called "time" lies in the fact that in the physical time process everything is determined by law, while in the historical process by human will.

From the theological point of view, historical time is nothing else but the history of salvation. But it is not only the negative desire to be saved from evil acting in the world which is physical and historical at the same time. The Christian understanding of salvation lies essentially in the restoration of the God-commanded teleology of the world and man, that is, in the positive movement towards "the image of perfection" which is built in the creation itself.

The gospel of Christ calls the free man to spiritual self-creation in the physical and historical world. And the most striking and paradoxical thing from the perspective of non-religious cosmology is that Christianity does not limit itself to the moral call. Its call is not that the human will should be simply brought in conformity with the beauty and order of the physical cosmos. The Christian commandment is not limited to the call to observe the laws of "divinely established cosmic harmony" as is the case with secular scientists and those endorsing the occultic-naturalistic view of the universe, which is religious in nature.

In Christianity, human beings are called to something more: they should participate in the "second creation," that is, they should freely bring

the cosmic world to communion with God the Creator. The goal is not to bring it back to some initial state of spiritual and moral harmony, but to realize it, its "body," as the way and means of spiritual communion with the pre-eternal God.

VII. *The material and the spiritual*

With regard to the physical cosmos, man finds himself in a twofold situation. On the one hand, "externally," the physical world is poised between God and man. The world is that which God granted man as the very matter of his existence. Therefore, man should understand the physical reality as that which can unite him with God, the Creator of the world. It is a world as divine food.

On the other hand, "internally" man finds himself poised between the physical reality of the world and the super physical reality of the invisible God. Man perceives God as a profound otherworldly reality. As relations with Him are established "outside" and "aside from" the physical cosmos as the body of man, the physical world becomes a spiritual enemy of man.

Both of these attitudes can be theologically justified. But they also carry a threat. Making either of these attitudes absolute leads to heresy, that is, a distorted understanding of Christian teaching.

How can this collision of the material and the spiritual be resolved? And how far is this collision real if, according to modern scientific ideas, "matter" turns out to be "spiritual," while "spirit" "material," that is, acquiring that which makes matter matter?

To these questions the Church has an answer of her own, though it hardly meets the requirements of scientific or philosophical thinking. This answer is linked with another problem, namely, the problem of divine interventions, that is, God the Creator's interventions in the work of the natural law He Himself has established. The matter in view in this case, however, is not miracles in the conventional sense. The principal answer of the Church is not to affirm that "the order of nature is overcome wherever God wishes so" (though this affirmation is logical, too, if "the order of nature" is recognized as God's creation). The principal answer lies in the teaching and practice of what the Church describes as sacraments.

"The sacrament of the sacraments" of the Church is the Divine Eucharist. In theological understanding and spiritual practice of many Christians, it signifies essentially that pre-eternal, immaterial and rationally incognizable God, the Creator of the physical cosmos and man, giving Himself to human beings as food to eat through physical "elements" of this world.

VIII. *God-Manhood of Christ as "the incarnation of the spirit"*

How can we understand this image: "God feeds people on Himself"? Here we come to the last but not the least Christian affirmation that cannot be understood and accepted within the context of scientific and even philosophical logic.

The Triune God of Christian faith, in the Person of the Father's Son and His Word (Logos), became man, that is, took the psychosomatic

human nature into His Divine Hypostasis. Matter, however understood, and the cosmos have become the body of the Divine Person. God has not only created this world, but also adopted it as His “existential body,” sharing it with created man. This means that the God-created physical world, in spite of the ontological gap between the created and uncreated existence, is really a means of communication between God and the master of the world, that is, man.

In the sacraments of the Church, God communicates to man His grace-giving energy given through physical elements of the world. Physical reality in this case is not distorted, preserving its nature and qualities, but rather serves as a conduit of Divine impact. Of course, this impact is not automatic but requires personal perception on the part of man.

God acts in the Church in an “unscientific way.” The verification of this action remains in the competence of the bearers of the “principle of will” – godlike human personalities.

The physics of the world can and must be a medium between God and man. It should be interiorized, included in interpersonal relations. In this lies its ultimate meaning since relations and unity of God and humanity is the goal of the world as cosmos and history.

Christian cosmology is essentially theology.

Minsk Theological Academy

NOTES

1. Today’s Orthodox theology has not evaded this task. I will point to only two authors as an example. Bishop Basil (Rodzyanko), who spent the last part of his life in America, published not long before his death a book entitled “A Theory of the Disintegration of the Universe and the Faith of the Forefathers” (Moscow: Palomnik Publishers, 1996). He devoted a considerable part of his book to relationship between modern scientific cosmology and theology. The same subject is studied presently by Alexei Nesteruk, a Russian scientist and theologian, who works in England. See his “Polkinghorne on Science and God” (*Sourozh, A Journal of Orthodox Life and Thought*, No. 77, 1999), a response to John Polkinghorne’s *Belief in God in an Age of Science*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), and “Humanity in the Universe: A Patristic Insight into Modern Cosmology” (*Sourozh*, No. 88, 2002)

2. See: John Zizioulas. “Personhood and Being,” Chapter I. – In: *Being as Communion*. SVSPress, 1985.