



*Journal of  
Religion & Society*  
Supplement Series

---

The Kripke Center

Supplement 11 (2015)

---

## Religion and the Sciences

### Opportunities and Challenges

Edited by Ronald A. Simkins and Thomas M. Kelly

### 13. Athens and Jerusalem or How to Think Eco-Theologically about *Scientia*

John J. O'Keefe, Creighton University

#### Introduction

This essay explores one possible way of thinking about the relationship between theological and scientific reasoning in the context of the environmental movement. Given my own academic background, this topic may seem to be something of a departure from normal patterns, and for this reason it requires some contextualization. I am a scholar of ancient Christianity, or, as we say internally, a scholar of *Patristics*, a foundational period in Christian history stretching from the first to the sixth centuries. My scholarly interests focused initially on the history of doctrine, in particular on the Christological controversies of the fifth century and later on patristic forms of biblical interpretation. In retrospect, the academic projects that have really grabbed my attention and interest have all been motivated by questions in the present. Early in my career when I dug into the details of the fifth-

century Christology of Cyril of Alexandria, I was motivated, at least in part, by a desire to resolve in my own mind particular tensions in contemporary Christology (O'Keefe). Likewise, my long-running interest in patristic biblical interpretation correlates to equally long-running questions about how to think with the fathers in an age of modern historical critical method (O'Keefe and Reno). In both of these cases I found that careful reflection on the struggles of the past helped me think more clearly about present challenges.

This paper, however, derives from neither of these projects. For the past seven or eight years I have spent a great deal of time thinking about environmental issues and about the relative weakness of the Christian theological response to the current ecological moment. As I have worked my way into what is a fairly large and complicated conversation, there is one particular theme that bothered me when I first encountered it and that continues to bother me now. As a group, ecologically-minded religious thinkers tend to blame the Christian past for our current ecological present (cf. White). This is frequently true even among those who locate themselves firmly within the Christian tradition and are not counseling wholesale rejection or replacement (see, for example, Santmire 1985, 2000).

Of particular concern to many ecologically aware theologians is the extent to which ancient Platonism continues to permeate the Christian imagination. Platonists, of course, differentiated sharply between matter and mind and understood things mental and intellectual to be vastly superior to things material and the earthy. For them humans exist in a terrible tension between life in a body that drags them down into change and disintegration and life as mind that promises participation in eternal stability. Generations of scholars have pointed out that Christianity made a deal with Platonism early in its history and that, because of this deal, Christian theology became fluent in the same dualistic tropes as its philosophical partner.

Of course, in making this deal Christian thinkers were attempting to reconcile their core religious narratives with the reigning knowledge system, the *scientia* of their age, namely, the Greek philosophical tradition. For the purposes of this essay, it is critical to point out that the word *scientia* in Latin does not mean *science*: its most basic meaning is *knowledge*. That modern *science* has claimed to be the sole heir of this ancient Latin word tells us a great deal about the current relationship between scientific and theological thinking. I will return to this later in the essay, but understanding the ancient meaning of *scientia* is critical to my argument. For now, I simply point out that the desire to engage the *scientia* of the Greeks was a move to demonstrate that Christian ideas could hold their own in the intellectual mainstream of the ancient world.

There is, of course, nothing particularly innovative or even controversial about highlighting this ancient relationship between platonic *scientia* and Christianity. Indeed, in ancient Christian thought, Christian narrative and Platonic categories interact so comprehensively that it is literally impossible to understand the development of Christian theology without having a strong working knowledge of classical philosophy. Every major ancient doctrine, from *creatio ex nihilo*, to the classical Trinity passed through a Platonizing sieve on their way to enshrinement in the great systematic expressions of the classical theological past. So, when eco-theologians point to this ancient alliance, they are not

revealing anything new. However, they innovate in the extent to which they find this relationship dangerous and destructive.

Many eco-theologians argue that the deal ancient Christianity struck with Platonism introduced a toxic anti-earthly virus into the human psychological collective. This virus presents itself symptomatically in our contemporary alienation from nature. Moreover, in general, these thinkers are not hopeful that things once paired can ever be separated. Thus, eco-theologians frequently attend to the past only as a foil for their own conclusions. For two-thousand years, they point out, Christianity has been preaching a world-denying doctrine, locating human identity in our immortal, non-physical souls, and pointing to life in the body and in the world as a form of exile. This Platonic past, many think, is so incompatible with contemporary ecological sensibility and the needs of the planet that the only choice we have is to reject it. By implication, the intellectual legacies of theological giants like Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, Cyril of Alexandria, and Maximus the Confessor need to be cast aside along with the achievements of, say, Benedictine spirituality or the remarkable medieval synthesis made possible by Thomas Aquinas and Pseudo-Dionysius.

But I overstate. To be fair, because most eco-theologians have not been trained in historical theology, they are not intuitively inclined to look to voices from the past for inspiration. Their rejection of them is not necessarily as intentional or as sinister as I have implied; what they are rejecting is more often derived from a caricature of the ancient conversation than upon a careful reading. For me, though, the problem is not so much the existence of this particular critique of the past. The bigger problem is, I think, the critics have a point, even a good point. The ancient emphasis on the ontological chasm separating mind and matter and spirit and body has contributed to the habit of modern Christians to imagine their identities as somehow independent of nature.<sup>1</sup> I also agree that this habit of mind contributes to our current ecological crisis. However, since I now have a 25 year-old practice of looking to the past for solutions to present problems, I am doggedly – maybe naively – clinging to the conviction that some solution can be found. Surely, the ancient deal with Platonism, despite its flaws, can be redeemed. In this essay I offer one possible redemption strategy and along the way I suggest what this strategy might imply for a wider conversation between theology and modern science.

On the one hand, it seems to me that issuing blanket condemnations of entire swaths of past human culture along with all of its intellectual achievements is an act of intellectual hubris characteristic of the modern world that should be resisted. In our effort to think in theologically new ways about the needs of the earth, we need not single out the past as an enemy to be killed: the synthesis between Christianity and Platonism stands as one of the great achievements in Western intellectual history and deserves our respect and admiration. On the other hand, we need not, because of this, feel compelled to defend all of the material

---

<sup>1</sup> While it is true that Christian theology was deeply impacted by Platonism in both its ancient and modern iterations, it is worth noting that it did not do so exclusively: other traditions and even the modern world itself absorbed many Platonic assumptions about the nature of reality. In this essay, however, I am responding only to problems created by Christianity's fascination with Platonic thinking.

conclusions of the ancient Christian encounter with Platonism. We do not, for example, need to force ourselves to believe there is such a thing as an intelligible world above this physical world, which is our true ontic home. We live in a very different universe where “up” leads to infinite space and clearly not toward mind and spirit. Likewise, there seems to be very little evidence suggesting our core personal identities are lodged in an immortal soul taking up temporary and unwelcome residence a physical body. Our cosmological horizon has shifted, and our theology need not and should not cling to a cosmology we no longer believe to be true.

So, we do not need to defend the particular details of how, say, Clement and Origen reconciled the gospel with Platonic insight, but we can still learn something critical from the encounter itself. In my view, it is precisely in this decision of ancient Christian theologians to engage “the wisdom of the Greeks” that we can find inspiration. In other words, we could say it is the formal pattern of their engagement rather than the material conclusions they reached that matter most, at least for the particular question I am asking. Said another way, I wish to suggest this: by paying more attention to the details of this ancient encounter between the Christian story and Greek *scientia*, the Christian past can help to inform both the parochial problem of how Christian theology can respond to the environmental challenge and the larger question of how Christian theology can engage scientific reasoning as such. I emphasize that this does not mean all of the material conclusions of the ancient encounter are wrong or no longer worthwhile or that the only value of the past resides in the patterns of reasoning it established. However, for the purposes of this essay, I am interested in patterns more than particular theological conclusions. The systematic project of rethinking ancient doctrinal conclusions in light of our revised *scientia* is a task falling well beyond the limited scope of this essay.

### **Ancient Christian Encounter with Philosophy: Tertullian and Irenaeus**

Some time in the early part of the third century the North African theologian Tertullian wrote one of the early Church’s most memorable one-liners: “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens,” he declared, “the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic?” (7). This declaration appears in one of Tertullian’s apologetic works, precisely in the *Prescriptions Against Heretics*, the primary target of which was Gnosticism. Scholars point out that the word “Gnostic” can be misleading because it suggests a unified religious movement and masks the diversity that actually existed in the communities that the word attempts to describe (Brakke). However, the term is still useful as a general descriptor of the kinds of Christians Tertullian was actively resisting, those Christians who tended to blame evil, suffering, and death on the existence of matter and the material world. For them, our bodies tragically trap our spirits in a world of putrid decay and disintegration. Our true identities are spiritual and our true home is located outside of this universe in a reality wholly and completely spiritual.

Tertullian worked to counter this worldview, and he did so in a surprising way by critiquing philosophical thinking itself. He thought the best way to respond to the gnostic challenge was to rely on the rhetorical persuasiveness of what he thought was the authentic Christian narrative rather than upon philosophical arguments and refutations. In other words, Tertullian argued that the gnostic narrative failed to persuade and lacked rhetorical

appeal. Philosophical reasoning could not respond to this gnostic narrative failure precisely because Gnosticism itself had been seduced by too much philosophizing.

Indeed, Tertullian declared, the orthodox believer must take care not to be led astray by philosophy lest he be seduced by false teaching and a misbegotten gospel. “There are human and demonic doctrines” Tertullian wrote, “engendered for itching ears by the ingenuity of that worldly wisdom which the Lord calls foolishness . . .” For Tertullian, this worldly wisdom “culminates in philosophy with its rash interpretation of God’s nature and purpose. It is philosophy,” he says, “that supplies the heresies with their equipment.” In contrast Tertullian points out, “our principles come from the Porch of Solomon,” that is from the scriptures, and we have “no use for a Stoic or dialectic Christianity” (7).

Modern scholarly assessments of Tertullian’s work and legacy have been careful to point out that Tertullian was not anti-intellectual and that his penchant for sharp and pointed contrast can be traced to his rhetorical and legal training (Dunn: 25-29). Tertullian positively relished in the techniques of a rhetorical style known as Second Sophistic, which was popular at this time. For example, in another work called *On the Flesh of Christ*, Tertullian defends the physical reality of the Incarnation by saying it is to be believed “because it makes no sense” and, he claims, the resurrection of Christ “is certain because it is impossible” (5.3). Although he understood philosophical reasoning, Tertullian’s first impulse was to argue for the rhetorical superiority of his position rather than for its philosophical clarity.

A few decades earlier the influential theologian Irenaeus of Lyon had engaged in his own rhetorical battle with Gnosticism. Irenaeus was born in Asia Minor but eventually migrated to the south of France where he became bishop of what is now the city of Lyon. In a lengthy and dense treatise called *Against the Heresies* (1.8.1), Irenaeus argues that the Gnostics had fundamentally misunderstood the core narrative of Christian proclamation. They were like bad artists who had taken apart a beautiful mosaic, mixed up the tesserae, and put them back together in a hideous way. What had been an image of a beautiful king now looked like an ugly dog or a fox. In their inept reassembly, the Gnostics had distorted the original intention of the artist beyond recognition. Irenaeus believed the key to refuting this distorted gnostic narrative was to tell the true Christian story in a way that was rhetorically thick and persuasive and to ridicule the narrative of his opponents as thin, foolish, and unattractive. Like Tertullian would be later, Irenaeus was suspicious of philosophy. In some places he clearly says Gnosticism has roots in Greek philosophical thinking (see Moringgiello). For this reason he, like Tertullian, preferred rhetorical arguments as he tried to make his case for the authentic Christian story.

Irenaeus called his thick narrative “the divine economy,” a phrase inherently misleading to modern ears because of the association of the word “economy” with money and finance. The patristic understanding of the divine economy, however, has nothing to do with money and finance and everything to do with God’s master plan. As Irenaeus understood it, the economy was a theory of everything, a story that began with the creation of the universe and the world, continued with the creation of humans and their fall from grace, and culminated in the redemption achieved by Christ in the renewal of creation. Unlike the anti-cosmic and anti-material narrative of his Gnostic opponents, Irenaeus’ story of the divine economy was pro-cosmic and understood the physical and material world to be a critically important part

of the divine plan. Indeed, Irenaeus constructed his Christian story upon core assumptions about the beauty of creation and the abiding significance of embodiment, ideas abhorrent to Gnostics. This divine economy was the “beautiful king” in the mosaic analogy that the Gnostics had distorted beyond recognition with their anti-cosmic and anti-materialist mythologies.

In book five of *Against the Heresies* (5.35.2), Irenaeus is at his most physicalist and writes in a way opposing gnostic spiritualism with a consistent materialism. Describing the arrival of the New Jerusalem at the time of Christ’s return, Irenaeus explains that “none of this can be taken allegorically, but everything is solid and true and substantial.” Humans, he explains, “will really rise from the dead, and not allegorically.” Indeed, Irenaeus concludes, “since men are real, their transformation must also be real . . . they will not go into non-being . . . For neither the substance nor the matter of the creation will be annihilated . . .” (Grant).

Scholars have pointed out that Irenaeus represents a broad swath of ancient Christian conviction with roots in the first century. This tradition has been called proto-orthodoxy in order to signal that many of its core convictions would eventually be enshrined in the great theological synthesis projects of the fourth and fifth centuries, which still form the basis of Christian theological orthodoxy. This is, of course, a complex story. For my purposes here I wish simply to highlight the extent to which one key front in the battle for authentic Christianity in antiquity was fought rhetorically rather than philosophically and that the goal of the struggle was to protect a particular telling of the Christian story itself rather than for the articulation of a clearly argued philosophical system.

In my view, this side of the ancient story has been under-appreciated in historical accounts of early orthodoxy. There are many reasons for this. However, it can be traced, at least in part, to a modern academic culture that does not often resort to rhetorical arguments. Rhetoric might be fine in a political speech or in a sermon, but theologians do not generally turn to it in the construction of sophisticated theological arguments. In contrast, a great deal of ancient theology was built through rhetoric reasoning. The resistance to “Athens” that we find in thinkers like Tertullian and Irenaeus stems not from anti-intellectualism but from a concern that Greek-style philosophical reasoning easily distorted the core narrative of the Gospel. Thus, they were concerned that philosophical arguments of this kind made the Gospel unrecognizable.

### **Ancient Christian Encounter with Platonism: Clement and Origen**

Meanwhile in Alexandria, at roughly the same time, a Greek-speaking theologian named Clement was crafting his own response to the gnostic challenge by building upon intellectual traditions and practices perfected by the Jewish philosopher and biblical interpreter Philo more than a century earlier. Just as Philo believed Jewish scriptures could be reconciled with Hellenistic philosophical traditions, so Clement thought the Gospel could be as well.

Clement was a convert to Christianity, but he was also well educated in the traditions of Greek philosophy. Clement was convinced that the best way to defeat Gnosticism was to show that true Christian knowledge was based upon a synthesis of gospel proclamation and Greek thinking. While Gnostics claimed to possess secret knowledge, Clement offered instead a public knowledge available to anyone willing to put in the intellectual effort to learn

it. Clement argued that philosophy represented God's covenant with the gentiles, preparing the Greeks for Christ just as the Law and the Prophets had prepared the Jews. According to one modern commentator, Clement "proved that faith and philosophy, Gospel and secular learning, are not enemies but belong together" (Quasten: 7). Clement, like Philo, presumed a compatibility between faith and reason that would have a long history in Christian thought. Indeed, one might argue, this presumed unity represents one of the most distinctive features of the Catholic intellectual tradition.

Clement was not the only second century theologian attempting a synthesis of faith and reason in the way I sketched above, but his impact is enhanced by the fact that he was the teacher of Origen, one of the greatest of all early Christian theologians. Origen is sometimes called the father of systematic theology, and throughout his career he labored tirelessly to reconcile the apparent contradictions between Christian gospel and Greek *scientia*.

Origen was interested in everything from theories about the origins of the universe to the ontological status of the incarnate Logos. He commented on every book of the Bible and relied heavily on figural (or non-literal) interpretation to discern hidden parallels with Platonic knowledge. To cite one example, Origen was puzzled by the existence of two creation stories at the beginning of the book of Genesis. Unlike modern scholars trained in the techniques of historical criticism, Origen did not turn to something like the documentary hypothesis as a way to resolve the conflict. Instead, Origen saw in Genesis a veiled account first of the creation of the intelligible world (Plato's world of forms and ideas) and second of the material world, which we humans currently occupy and from which, in some way, we must be delivered. Origen borrowed these techniques of figural reading from his own culture where similar methods had been used in the interpretation of Homer and other classical texts (Trigg: 121-28). Like modern historical critical method, figural reading allowed for the reconciliation of two different styles of thinking and writing. In the modern case, historical criticism allows the diverse literary forms of the Bible to be re-narrated in a way that seems both more comprehensible and truer to modern historically conscious ears. Origen did the same thing formally, only he was attempting to bridge the distance to Platonic rather than historical thinking.

The massive ambition and scope of Origen's project defies easy summary. However, it is important to point out that he created a particular theological style which scholars refer to as "Origenist."<sup>2</sup> Thus just as one can point to an Augustinian style rooted in Augustine, or to a Thomistic style rooted in Thomas Aquinas, so we can point to a theological style rooted in Origen. This style of theological reasoning was confident in both the appropriateness and

---

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note that "Origenist" is an ambiguous word. On the one hand, we can use it to describe those who did theology in the style of Origen. This is similar to referring to a modern theologian as, say, a Rahnerian, in the school of Karl Rahner. On the other hand, the word "Origenist" is connected to the Origenist Controversy, a movement that began in the fourth century that resisted the theology of Origen and Origenists. Origenism became an official heresy and Origen himself was condemned posthumously at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553. Despite the condemnation and the loss of many of Origen's works, his theological impact remains massive. In this essay, I use the term in the first and generic sense. For a comprehensive discussion of the topic see Clark.

necessity of understanding Christian belief in a distinctively philosophical idiom. Indeed, this style directly influenced the development of every core Christian doctrine, including but not limited to the doctrine of creation, the doctrine of the Trinity, and classical Christology. Since many Origenists in late antiquity were also monks and ascetics, the Origenist style also impacted both the language of Christian spirituality and the practices associated with it. To study the emergence and spread of the Origenist style is in many ways to study the birth and spread of Christian theology itself. Thus, it is difficult not to be a fan of Origen even if we feel no desire to be bound by all of his conclusions.

### Rhetorical and Philosophical Styles in the Emergence of Orthodoxy

While these stories about Tertullian, Irenaeus, Clement and Origen are well-known to scholars working in the field of Patristics, they are less well-known to people working in other fields. However, in our fascination with Origen and his Hellenizing legacy, I think even patristic scholars have not fully appreciated the extent to which the narrative and rhetorical style championed by Tertullian and Irenaeus was never fully domesticated or negated by the philosophical impulses of thinkers like Clement and Origen. Indeed, it is precisely in the persistence of this “Irenaeian” style throughout the patristic period that I find a pattern to guide my own quest to redirect this ancient conversation for a modern purpose.

Modern readers of ancient history and theology have been heavily socialized to sympathize with the Origenist style. This is true for several reasons. First, this socialization has been reinforced by centuries of theological conversation with philosophy. We are comfortable with the ancient alliance forged between philosophy and theology. Indeed, the Origenist intellectual style has come to so dominate theological thinking that it is difficult to think in other ways. Second, since modern scholars do not inhabit an academic culture that values rhetoric and persuasive speech at a level equal to syllogistic arguments, it can be easy to miss the tension that actually existed between the style of Tertullian and Irenaeus and the style of Clement and Origen. Or, to recapture the concrete language of Tertullian, we can easily fail to notice that a tension between Athens and Jerusalem remained for a long time and that to a very great extent it was this tension that produced the ancient doctrinal synthesis of the fourth and fifth centuries.

With a recovered sensitivity to the endurance of this tension, I think it is possible to read the history of the development of Christian doctrine in the fourth century and beyond as one in which the desire to reconcile Christianity with the *scientia* of the Greeks was frequently challenged and redirected by the narrative discourse represented by Irenaeus. In critical ways and at critical moments the reassertion of the narrative of the divine economy forced a modification of the underlying Platonizing solutions that formed the bedrock of Origenist approach. In other words, Jerusalem frequently stood up to Athens and Jerusalem often won. I offer three examples.

First, in the fourth century theologians worked out a comprehensive theology of God that gave rational coherence to the idea of Christian monotheism. One theologian has described the fourth century’s main theological preoccupation as “the search for the Christian doctrine of God (Hanson). The result of the debate was the Nicene synthesis, which is represented in the Nicene Creed and which forms the basis of the Christian theology of God to this day. This doctrine, as it came to be expressed, makes fundamental

modifications to Platonism. Indeed, one could argue that the defeated position – what we used to call Arianism – was inherently more compatible with a Platonic view of reality.<sup>3</sup> The anti-Nicene (Arian) position understood the Logos/Son as something like a second God, mediating ontologically between the more remote Father and the rest of the creation. This position was inherently more Platonic than the Nicene position. For the Nicene theologians, the Father and the Logos were ontic equals, which means the Son did not function as a mediator in a hierarchical chain of being. The Nicene position was much more difficult to explain philosophically, but it was much better at preserving biblical monotheism and the core Christian idea that the God of the universe had become incarnate in Jesus Christ.

The historical details surrounding the evolution of Nicene theology are not important here. I wish only to underscore that the key arguments advancing the modification in the philosophical system came not from philosophy but from Christian narrative. This is certainly the best way to understand the thought of Athanasius, one of the core architects of Nicene theology. He insisted that the Logos/Son of God had to be fully divine or else the promises embedded in the story of salvation would be false. Athanasius turned to the Gospels and argued that because the narrative said “God became human” the anti-Nicene idea that “a lower mediator God became human” was wrong. The story of the divine economy trumped the easier path offered by a more facile accommodation with Platonic metaphysics.

We can discern similar concerns emerging in the Christological controversy of the fifth century. In this case theological energy focused not on the godhead as in the fourth century, but explicitly on the relationship between the divine and human in the one person of Christ. The strong impulse of many theologians involved in the debate was to protect the divide between the divine and the human on the grounds that it is impossible for the infinite to become finite and that technically it is impossible for God to become human without ceasing to be God. Some theologians were also concerned that overly zealous incarnational language would imply divine suffering and changeability. A core conviction of the Platonizing theologians was that God is impassible (incapable of suffering) in God’s essence. Because of this, they were resistant to thinking that, say, John’s claim that the “Word became flesh and dwelt among us” literally meant that the Word actually became flesh. Such a literal interpretation would suggest changeability or suffering in the divine nature. Various schemes were offered to reduce the tension caused by this implication. Most prioritized protecting the distinction between the divine Word and the human person, or between creator and creation. One proposal (Apollinarian) suggested the Word dwelt in a human body (flesh) but did not actually “become flesh”; the body acted as a buffer, absorbing suffering and change while the divine Word remained safely protected in transcendence. Another major suggestion (Nestorian) imagined the divine and human inhabiting separate psychological spaces in Christ, much like two operating systems installed on a single device. Both of these solutions in some way protected the *a priori* commitment to God’s impassibility. However,

---

<sup>3</sup> Scholars now recognize the term “Arianism” as a misnomer, since Arius faded from the scene of the controversy fairly early. The preferred terminology is “Nicene” and “Anti-Nicene.”

both were also deemed inadequate at the council of Chalcedon in 451 because in the view of the council fathers they missed the point of the Incarnation.

The main architect of the eventual doctrinal synthesis that solved the problem was Cyril of Alexandria. His theology of hypostatic union is still a required stop for anyone writing seriously about Christology. However, although his discussion of the hypostatic union makes liberal use of philosophical language and concepts, the impulse behind it is derived from Christian narrative. Cyril argued that the Word of God becoming human represents God's permanent commitment to the world and that understanding this is the key point of the divine economy. God became a human being so that humans can share in God's life and be free from death and decay. When asked how the infinite could become finite, Cyril famously resorted to rhetorical rather than philosophical arguments, declaring, "he just does" and he does so in "an unspeakable and mysterious way." Cyril also responded to critics who suggested his Christology attributed suffering directly to the godhead because of an overly literal understanding of the Word becoming flesh. In response, Cyril said that the Christ, the Word made flesh, "suffered impassibly," and "he suffered in an unsuffering way" (O'Keefe). This language infuriated his critics, especially the bishop Theodoret of Cyprus, who publicly mocked Cyril's solution as philosophically incoherent. Clearly, Cyril thought that philosophy was in danger of weakening the dramatic narrative of the incarnation. As a corrective, he turned to rhetoric. His positions may have enraged his opponents, but they became orthodoxy. In this case again, rhetoric trumped philosophical argument.

For a final example I turn briefly to the seventh-century theologian Maximus the Confessor. Maximus was a deeply cosmic thinker, and in many of his writings he engaged in extensive meditations on the nature and fate of the universe. His theology was heavily influenced by the language and cosmological assumptions of Neo-Platonism. Yet, drawing up the prior tradition and learning from the mistakes of his Origenist predecessors, Maximus worked out a theology of the universe differing markedly from the philosophical systems with which he was in dialogue. While Platonism had little regard for matter and physicality, for Maximus the physical divinization of the material creation through the incarnation of the Word, and with it the divinization of human beings was the very point of and ultimate trajectory of the divine economy. As one modern commentator has noted, "Maximus' achievement, from one angle is a panoramic commentary on the first chapter of Ephesians and on Colossians 1:15-23" where Paul famously meditates on the cosmic implications of Christ (Maximus: 20).

Maximus describes the incarnation not as opening a path from matter to spirit but as inaugurating "a wholly new way of being human" in which our created physical nature is united to and transformed by the divinity of Christ. For Maximus, our destiny is not matter transcended but matter divinized and transformed (Maximus: 70). Once again, in Maximus we see Athens challenged by Jerusalem.

### **Conclusions and Some Thoughts about Theology and Modern Science**

I do not wish to overstate my case. Clearly, the encounter between Athens and Jerusalem in ancient Christianity was a two way street. The language and metaphysical assumptions of Greek thought constitute a thick and inescapable aspect of the patrimony of the church fathers. Yet, I do think that at times we are inclined to understate the ways in

which the rhetorical and narrative aspects of the patristic project continuously and vigorously asserted themselves in the formation of the classical Christian tradition, and I also think becoming aware of this can be helpful in our encounter with certain contemporary theological problems to those of us struggling to write an eco-theology that remains firmly within the Christian tradition. Unlike, say, systematic or historical theology, eco-theology cannot avoid direct encounter with the reigning *scientia* of the modern world, namely the natural sciences. For eco-theologians, the most relevant of these are evolutionarily biology and cosmology. So, what would it look like for Christians writing eco-theology to engage these scientific disciplines following the pattern of the fathers that I have sketched above? Is there any way that Jerusalem can speak to this particular Athens without being overwhelmed by it?

Constructing an analogy between ancient Christian encounter with Platonism and modern Christian encounter with science is complicated by the fact that Platonism is a philosophical system and modern science is not. Modern scientific method by design seeks to be descriptive about the nature of things rather than evaluative. Thus, an evolutionary biologist can tell us how life on the earth probably emerged, but the same biologist cannot tell us anything about the meaning of this emergence for human existence. Similarly, a cosmologist can tell us we live in an expanding universe that began with the Big Bang, but the same cosmologist cannot tell us why there is anything at all or why I should not lose heart at the prospect of a future dead cosmos that has lost all its life-giving energy to the forces of entropy. I still recall the first day of undergraduate physics class where the professor expressed succinctly the ambition of modern science is to describe without assigning meaning. "Don't ask me what the things I am teaching you mean," he said. "I am just here to tell you the way things are."

That said, it is also the case that efforts to prevent modern science from entering the meaning business have not been very successful. Examples are easy to find. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the conclusions of Copernicus and Newton contributed to the development of Deism and mechanistic views of nature that impacted human economic and ethical systems. Darwin's conclusions in *The Origin of Species* led some to claim social injustice was somehow biologically necessary and therefore morally justifiable. The fantastic successes of the applied science in the form of technological progress have led many to make utopian claims about the maturing of the human race. Modern atheists like Richard Dawkins draw all kinds of non-scientific conclusions from supposedly neutral science. How does, say, noting that the earth evolved over billions of years yield the conclusion that God does not exist and that all religion is bad except by means of a retreat from the objectivity of science? When science crosses into the meaning business in this way it resembles ancient Platonism a great deal. For the Platonists, physics and metaphysics overlapped and interacted all the time as part of a comprehensive vision of the cosmos and the role of humans in it.

It seems to me that there is nothing inherently wrong with using the conclusions of science in the construction of meaning. However, we need to recognize that these meanings are not inherent in the science. The fact of evolution does not lead inevitably to Social Darwinism any more than the fact of the Big Bang leads to Atheism. That said, increasing numbers of eco-theologians seem to think that the fact that we live in an expanding universe

(physics) leads necessarily to a particular set of religious conclusions and actions (philosophy).

For some, the narratives of historical Christianity are often considered to be unhelpful or irrelevant to the truth disclosed by the science. Two examples will suffice, but there are many. In her book *Gaia and God*, theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether argues that humans should model their society and their image of God upon the mutuality embedded in the ecosystems of the earth itself. To the extent that we do not, we sin and our social relationships collapse. For Ruether, the historical patriarchy of Christianity is a sin against the natural religious order embedded in the fact of ecological science. Similarly, in their book *The Universe Story*, Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry argue that the scientific story of an emergent and evolving cosmos supersedes the religious narratives of the human past and calls us to a new form of living characterized by deep ecological harmony. Indeed, they say that the science pushes us to understand that the universe has, through evolution, been intentionally working toward the development of conscious life and awareness such that we now find in modern humans.

The tendency to mythologize science in the service of eco-theology has been roundly and definitely critiqued by Lisa Sideris in her book *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology and Natural Selection*. Also, Matthew Ashley has noted the philosophical presumptions of Swimme and Berry can easily be exposed as yet another expression of Hegelian idealism that has been endlessly recapitulated by many theologians since Schleiermacher. It may be that we reject the critiques of Sideris and Ashley and continue to admire the conclusions of Ruether, Swimme, and Berry, but in doing so we must recognize that the science does not compel us to do so.

In antiquity Christian theologians did not really attempt to replace the physics of Platonism. With the exception of the introduction of the doctrine of *creation from nothing*,<sup>4</sup> they left the structure of the platonic cosmos largely intact. The spiritual and intelligible were still “up there.” The cosmos remained full of intelligences more noble than humans. Humans had rational souls, which animals and plants lacked. The universe was permeated by the rationality of the Word (*logos*) of God. In short, they embraced the science of Platonism. Yet, even while they embraced the Platonic description of the structure of things, they also thought it was perfectly possible to reconcile the Christian narrative with that structure. For them, Christ disclosed the true meaning and purpose of that universe, which Platonism itself was unable to deliver.

In the process of putting the Christian narrative in deep dialogue with Platonic *scientia*, Christian discourse in many ways took on “a Greek feel.” However, I have been arguing throughout this essay that there were critical moments in the development of the theological tradition where some voices, like Origen’s, suggested that the *scientia* compelled particular modifications to the core narratives of the Gospel. This is especially evident in early

---

<sup>4</sup> This was, of course, a modification of great consequence, even if unintentional. By severing the ontological connection between God and the world, Christian theologians created the possibility of imagining nature independent from God and with it the possibility of modern science.

Christian attitudes toward embodiment and the material creation. While Origen wanted to downplay a teaching like, for example, the resurrection of the body because it seemed incompatible with a Platonic understanding of the lower status of matter, the wider tradition rejected Origen and embraced a doctrine of the divinization of matter, including material human bodies. For them, Origen rejected too much and assumed, incorrectly, that Platonic physics required a particular interpretation of the destiny of material bodies.

Contemporary eco-theologians frequently follow a pattern similar to that of Origen. That is, they assume too quickly that the conclusions of biology and physics about the nature of life and the universe compel us to adopt a particular set of conclusions about the plausibility of our narratives. Consider again the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, which is as awkward in our world as it was in the ancient one. I have personally been in conversations with theologians at the American Academy of Religion who think science compels them to reject the resurrection. For them, we need to embrace the fact that at death we are reabsorbed into a universe that offers no evidence supporting the possibility of resurrection. Other thinkers tend to idealize the resurrection, claiming that it means mystical participation in something like the cosmic Christ or cosmic creativity.

However, if we are to follow the example of the ancient proponents of Jerusalem we might not be so quick to make these moves. Are there not, perhaps, insights into the true nature of things that Christian narrative discloses far better than the scientific observation. The resurrection of the body may not be true, but science does not compel me to think it is not. It is just as fair for me to claim that scientists are overreaching when they draw metaphysical conclusions from physical observation. The effort to push science beyond its limits into the domain of meaning says more about the limits of science than it does about the plausibility of particular religious narratives.

On the other hand, Christian theologians need to listen to science and, when necessary, we should be willing to rethink our doctrines in the light of scientific conclusions. We should not, for example, continue to act as if we live in the Platonic universe and imagine bodies rising up to some celestial paradise. Instead, we might imagine such a doctrine infusing hope into our contemplation about the deep future of the cosmos, a future in which the things that we love, precisely in their embodiment, are not lost forever but somehow retained. The work of Stephen Webb and Christopher Southgate exemplify such an effort.

The project of rethinking the Christian doctrinal synthesis in the light of our new cosmology and scientific knowledge is certainly a large one. What would it mean, for example, to reconstruct our theology of God without recourse to Greek concepts like *ousia* and *hypostasis*? What does the incarnation mean given the size and scope of the universe we inhabit? Do we still need a doctrine of creation from nothing if the quantum physicists turn out to be correct and we inhabit not a universe but a multiverse? These are big questions and obviously impossible to answer here. However, it seems to me that if we are to follow the intellectual pattern of the fathers, these are precisely the questions we need to ask. In asking, however, Jerusalem can challenge Athens at least as effectively as the reverse.

## Bibliography

Ashley, Matthew

- 2010 "Reading the Universe Story Theologically: The Contribution of Biblical Narrative Imagination." *Theological Studies* 71 (2010): 870-902.

Brakke, David

- 2010 *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Clark, Elizabeth A.

- 1992 *The Origenist Controversy: The Cultural Construction of an Early Christian Debate*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Dunn, Geoffrey D.

- 2004 *Tertullian*. New York: Routledge.

Grant, Robert M.

- 1997 *Irenaeus of Lyons*. New York: Routledge.

Hanson, R. P. C.

- 1988 *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318-381*. London: T. & T. Clark.

Maximus the Confessor

- 2003 *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ*. Translated by Paul Blowers and Robert Wilken. Crestwood: St. Vladimir Seminary Press.

Moringgiello, Scott

- 2008 *Irenaeus Rhetor*. Unpublished dissertation. University of Notre Dame.

O'Keefe, John J.

- 1997 "Impassible Suffering? Divine Impassibility and Fifth-Century Christology." *Theological Studies* 58, 1: 39-60.

O'Keefe, John J., and R. R. Reno

- 2005 *Sanctified Vision*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Ruether, Rosemary Radford

- 1992 *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.

Santmire, H. Paul

- 1985 *The Travail of Nature: The Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress.
- 2000 *Nature Reborn: The Ecological and Cosmic Promise of Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Quasten, Johannes

1984 *Patrology. Volume II: The Ante-Nicene Literature After Irenaeus.* Westminster: Christian Classics.

Southgate, Christopher

2008 *The Groaning of Creation: God, Evolution, and the Problem of Evil.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox.

Sideria, Lisa H.

2003 *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology and Natural Selection.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Swimmee, Brian and Berry, Thomas

1992 *The Universe Story: From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era A Celebration of the Unfolding of the Cosmos.* New York: HarperCollins.

Tertullian

1956 *The Prescriptions Against Heretics.* In *Early Latin Theology.* Translated by S. L. Greenslade. Philadelphia: Westminster.

1980 *On the Flesh of Christ.* In *The Christological Controversy.* Translated by Richard A. Norris, Jr. Philadelphia: Fortress.

Trigg, Joseph Wilson

1983 *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-Century Church.* Atlanta: John Knox.

Webb, Stephen H.

2012 *Jesus Christ, Eternal God: Heavenly Flesh and the Metaphysics of Matter.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

White, Lynn Jr.

1967 "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis." *Science* 155, 3767 (March 10): 1203-1207.