



248. August 8/21,1977 St. Gregory of Sinai

Categories : [Letters](#)

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Dear Father Ioannikios,

Christ is in our midst!

A few notes on our continuing “dialogues on evolution” many thanks for your two letters (one to Br. Makarios).

1. Concerning “day-age”—I agree entirely with the proposal to measure them “not chronologically but theologically.” I only suggest we be consistent in doing so. Dr. Kalomiros and others, when they say that “day-age” or “a thousand years in the sight of God is as one day” immediately conclude that the way is open to accepting the “geologic ages” with their fabulous millions of years as compatible with the Genesis “days.” They thus measure the “ages” quite “chronologically”—which makes not one bit more sense than the fundamentalists’ “24 hour days.” The best position, I think, on this point is that of Blessed Augustine: “What kind of days these were it is extremely difficult or perhaps impossible for us to conceive, and how much more to say!” (City of God, XI, 6.) The eight “day,” we know, is to be without end; the seventh “day” is a definite duration of at least some thousands of years; the first six “days,” if they could be measured chronologically at all (and we shouldn’t say they absolutely couldn’t be, since such Fathers as St. Ephraim of Syria say they could), might be 24-hours long, or perhaps of some other duration. We should only be aware of the mystery of those first “days” which eludes our precise apprehension.

2. The question of the “age of the earth” is a different question, raised by science (which cannot give it a completely satisfactory answer) and touching on Revelation and certain theological questions. From the point of view of Biblical interpretation, this question is dependent on a more fundamental one: “the age of mankind.” Here the text of Genesis does not need to fear the evidence of science; and since modern science does talk about this, we have to have an intelligent answer to the opinion concerning the “millions of years” which, supposedly, not merely “galaxies” existed, but even man himself and his near “ancestors” have been walking on earth. One cannot escape the question of the existence of man in chronological time (since both Genesis with its patristic interpreters and science seem to be talking about the same kind of “years” we know) by reference to the formation of galaxies and the relativity of time—the “primordial galaxies” themselves are a product of the scientific speculations of modern thinkers, and neither more or less deserving of credence than ancient Greek speculations concerning the origin of the world.

3. This raises another fundamental question: how much should we use science in a commentary on Genesis? I would say, as a very minimum: we must know enough about science and its modern



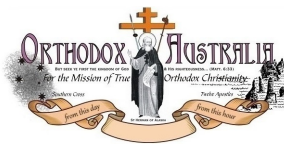
speculations to have an answer to those who use it to “disprove Genesis.” Thus its chief function today is perhaps negative. But beyond that, I think that our attitude should be that of St. Basil in his Hexaemeron: the legitimate conclusions of science should be used whenever they help the task of interpreting the sacred text. The “science-phobia” which has been caused among some Orthodox Christians by the false use of science on the part of anti-Christians should be overcome. In the case of evolution, I don’t see how the question can be discussed at all without a basic knowledge of the “scientific proofs” for and against. I don’t mean we should become passionately attached to them or place them on the same level as theology—we should just be aware of them and know how to assess their relative value. The “scientific creationists” are very helpful in this regard, because they have hunted up evidence which had been selectively disregarded by pre-disposed evolutionists (for example, the remarkable evidence of an earth “under 10,000 years old,” which must definitely be weighted against the evidence for an earth much older; the overlapping human and dinosaur tracks in Texas, etc.)

4. But is the question of the age of the human race (some 7000 or 8000 years vs. a million or more years) really theological, or important? You doubt whether it is. I offer two observations:

a. The Holy Fathers (probably unanimously) certainly have no doubt that the chronology of the Old Testament, from Adam onwards, is to be accepted “literally.” They did not have the fundamentalist’s over-concern for chronological precision, but even the most mystical Fathers (St. Isaac the Syrian, St. Gregory Palamas, etc.) were quite certain that Adam lived literally 900 years, that there were some 5500 years (“more or less”) between the creation and the Birth of Christ, etc. (Blessed Augustine has a good discussion as to the differences between the Greek and Hebrew chronologies—the thousand years “more or less” didn’t bother him any more than it did the other Fathers—but the assertion that Adam lived a million or more years ago, and that thus the Old (and New) Testament chronology is quite arbitrary or fanciful, could not but have evoked numerous patristic discussions.) Can we be so trusting of the conclusions of modern science (especially if we have a basic knowledge of radiometric dating procedures and the philosophy underlying them!) as to totally overturn the Patristic opinion? Dr. Kalomiros and other Orthodox evolutionists say we should, without a second thought—I would say this is dangerous presumption, and an intrusion of dubious science into the realm of revealed truth. When Dr. K. dismisses the patristic interpretation of the ?? chronology as “Jewish rationalism,” I even begin to wonder what his basic attitude to the Fathers is? It seems to have an element of disrespect, to say the least.

b. More important (more theological): one’s picture of reality, of the world, definitely influences one’s view of God. I offer you (very briefly) two pictures (“models”) of man and his world:

(1) Man created some 7000-8000 years ago, separately from other creatures (not descended from others), dispassionate by nature (in soul and body), with Eve miraculously created from his rib (in a way we can not describe with scientific precision, as St. John Chrysostom indicates), in a world of creatures with natures basically stable and not in process of becoming other natures. Much could be said on separate details of this picture, and knowledge of many of the details can never be

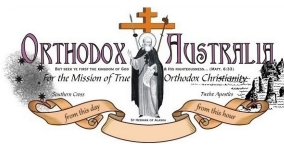


precise, but basically: it does not contradict the text of Genesis and is harmonious with the Orthodox view of God.

(2) Man descended from lower creatures, passionate by his origin and nature, becoming dispassionate in paradise (when grace brought him out of his bestial state, according to Kalomiros) at a moment very hazy chronologically and theologically (today Roman Catholic evolutionists deny paradise altogether because they can't reconcile it with evolutionary philosophy), existing in his fallen state perhaps a million or more years, during which time he gradually came up from savagery to civilization, the record of him in the ?? being extremely sketchy and not to be taken seriously when it speaks of "years"; the world around man being in a constant state of change and ascent from one nature to another, and this whole process being explainable ("more or less") by science, except for the original impulse of creation itself (which produced a rather undifferentiated mass with the "potentiality" of all future developments). (Kalomiros insists there is nothing "miraculous" about the Six Days of creation—they all proceeded according to scientific laws!). This picture, that of "theistic" or "God-guided" evolution, can be reconciled with the text of Genesis and its patristic interpretation only by means of many jumps and improvisations and wholesale disregard of patristic evidence. The chief reason, I suspect, why it does not give the horrors to Orthodox believers in "God-guided evolution" (as, for example, Fr. Nektas Palassis professes himself to be)—is simply because they put their heads in the sand and don't bother to think about it at all, because of a very unhealthy science-phobia. But my point here is: is not one's view of God basically affected by such a picture of the world? For example, the view of an "Orthodox evolutionist" like Theodosius Dobzhansky (in his address on receiving an honorary doctorate from St. Vladimir's Seminary!) utterly denies the Providence of God in the world; his "God" is the Deist God. St. John Damascene (following St. Gregory of Nyssa and others) states that it is unworthy of God to believe that He created man's body and soul in separate moments, as if He did not have power for the whole act at once; this act of creation was simultaneous; here the text of Genesis is not to be interpreted literally or "chronologically" (Kalomiros specifically denies this—his interpretation of St. Seraphim's words would collapse otherwise!). How much less worthy of God, then, to believe that He created only some kind of material ocean of potentiality and left everything to "evolve by itself" according to natural laws!

All this, as you can see, is an informal discussion presented for your reflection—precise citations will have to be given when I have time.

5. A different point, from your letter to Br. Makarios. On the "coats of skin"—yes, I recall that St. Gregory the Theologian also gives the interpretation (as his personal opinion) that these could signify the "coarse flesh" of Adam after his fall. A very important point, bound up with the curse and the change in the nature of the world and man, as opposed to the "very good" (i.e. incorrupt) state in the beginning. Dr. Kalomiros says: the world was obviously corrupt and mortal before Adam's fall; it was only incorrupt in God's idea of it before the actual creation, the "first creation" as opposed to the "second creation" of St. Gregory of Nyssa. As opposed to this, one could collect patristic evidence (for example, St. Simeon the New Theol., Homily 45, where it is very explicit) that



shows, the material creation (and not just paradise) before Adam's fall to be incorrupt and without death. But here I think we should beware taking the opposite side from Kalomiros and thinking we know with "scientific certainty" (as he thinks he does) what the nature of material reality was before the fall. Bishop Theophan the Recluse (in his commentary on Rom. 8:21) has a word of caution on this. I think it is enough to point out the different state of the world before the fall, its rather mysterious nature (to us who never saw it), and the inappropriateness of applying the law of scientific "uniformitarianism" to it. (Andreyev makes this point.)

6. A final point for now: it seems to me that in the "intellectual space" where science and theology overlap (a good description!) in the question of evolution, there are two quite different spheres of conflict and/or agreement between them:

a. Everything related to the "Six Days" and in general the state of the world before Adam: this is shrouded in some mystery (because of the different state of the world then) and it would be foolish for us to try to be "scientifically precise" about it. This is the biggest mistake of Kalomiros (and also of many fundamentalists). The creation of Adam from the dust is a mystery (for example); we can't picture it. But still we can know enough of it from the Fathers to avoid unworthy opinions about it. (It was instantaneous; Adam came from no other creature; etc.) The evolutionists remove the mystery from it—all is according to scientifically-known natural processes; from an Orthodox person, this is inexcusable rationalism.

b. Everything related to Adam after his fall—i.e., human history as a whole—is much more accessible to us according to our present knowledge. Thus, a discussion of the "chronology" of the Six Days is useless; but the "chronology" of mankind from Adam on down is accessible to us, limited only by physical factors (documents, paleontology, archeology). Here we should apply our God-given minds to find the most worthy explanations of the supposed "conflicts" between Genesis and paleontology. And this means: reading the patristic commentaries, and understanding the scientific evidence.

I've already used up my time. I look forward to your next comments.

With love in Christ,
Unworthy Hieromonk Seraphim