

RATIONALISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM

— The Two Banes of Western Theology —

By Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

Introduction

The text that follows has been redacted from three letters that were written some thirty-five years ago. The purpose of the letters was to demonstrate that Orthodox Christianity does not, and cannot, follow the ideologies of rationalism or fundamentalism in understanding and interpreting the Holy Scriptures. Instead, Orthodox Christianity follows in the footsteps of the Holy and God-bearing Fathers of the Church, who, as we shall see, employ other approaches in understanding Holy Writ.

When the Holy Fathers viewed the Scriptures, they saw a text that conveyed many levels of meaning. The sacred texts speak to every man, but every man has his own limits and capacity of understanding, depending on the illumination given him by grace and according to the purity of his heart.

Opting only for a simplistic, literal understanding of the Holy Scriptures [as the Fundamentalist Protestants do] will not help us — as the Holy Fathers show us, and as we shall see. It would be prudent for us, rather, to "follow in the footsteps of the Holy Fathers," since it is dangerous to plunge into the depths of Scriptural interpretation unassisted. "Fools rush in," it is said, "where angels fear to tread."

Then said Philip unto the eunuch of Candace, "Understandest thou what thou readest? And the eunuch replied, "How can I except some man should guide me?"

(c.f. Acts 8:30)

Rationalism

The question of our creation has to do with our existence and deepest identity, and cannot be dismissed.

On the other hand, one hesitates to take up the pen and broach such a subject, for the whole question of creation is so unfathomable and incomprehensible for the mind of man. For as God asked Job, "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?", which can be asked of any of the puny race of men. Creation is a mystery that deserves to be honored by silence. And yet, echoing St. Paul's words to the "foolish Galatians," "In that which any man is bold, (I speak foolishly) I am bold also." And to others, who were in great danger of being led astray by deceivers, he became even more "foolish" and spoke of the divine visions and revelations that he had received from God.

The mysteries of God are ineffable, and no one knows this better than one who has lived and experienced them. For a man initiated into the workings of grace, doctrinal formulas and expositions of the Faith and catechisms are really unnecessary, for he has the Primary Source; he has already entered within the veil, within the Holy of holies. But see, he too is a man, and he lives in the world and wears the flesh, and is compassed about with infirmities of both soul and body. When the Unwaning Light recedes from his heart and the darkness begins to close about him, he too must grope along the wall lest he lose the path. The wall is the Church's doctrinal formulations; they are the "hedge" which the Husbandman set up round about His Vineyard; they are the battlements that repulse and crush the blasphemous and spiritually barbarous hordes of heresies that seek to desecrate and despoil the sanctified people of the Heavenly Jerusalem. To paraphrase St. Gregory the Theologian, we are forced to speak when we should keep silence. We are forced to expound that which should remain hidden. Human language is totally incapable of accurately expressing the mysteries of God, and yet, for the vast majority of us, it is all we have. Would that our eyes were pure and enlightened so that we might see God face to face and speak to Him like Moses, as one does to a friend. Alas, such is not the case. What makes matters worse is when, for his own purposes, someone begins attacking or perverting those mysteries. Then, in spite of our reluctance and incompetence, the Church is forced to speak. We become foolish as Paul did with the foolish Galatians. In this sense, dogmas and doctrinal formulations are a necessity forced upon the Church from without, then the Church, "becoming foolish," is forced to express the ineffable, lest her flock be destroyed.

In 1967 and 1968, the late Dr. Alexander Kalomiros, the author of *Against False Union*, wrote a series of articles dealing with rationalism which appeared in *Orthodoxos Typos*, a monthly religious periodical published in Greece. The articles ran for eleven issues.

Now, in these articles, Kalomiros demonstrates how the Church has always fought against rationalism. Shortly before he began writing them, he had referred to Makrakis (a Greek religio-philosopher who was condemned for heresy by the Church of Greece and who died in the beginning of the twentieth century) as a rationalist, and some followers of

Makrakis took great offense at this since, for them, "rationalist" was synonymous with "atheist," which, they declared, Makrakis was not. But, by definition, rationalism, in the theological domain, is "the practice of explaining in a manner agreeable to reason whatever is apparently supernatural in records of sacred history" (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1962, p. 1660). So there are two types of rationalists, the "atheistic rationalists" and the "theistic rationalists;" and both are foreign and inimical to the Church and to the spirit of Holy Scripture and the patristic writings. The theistic rationalist tries to take Divine Revelation and push it into the pigeon-holes of human reason so that the paltry brain of man can cope with it.

Thomas Aquinas was a rationalist, even though he wrote a "Theology." So were Luther and Calvin, because though they studied Holy Scripture, they sought to comprehend its significance with their limited human understanding, unlike the Fathers of the Church, who, by grace and their ascetical life, became pure in heart so that they might receive the illumination of the All-holy Spirit. As a result of their rationalism, both Luther and Calvin, like Aquinas, fashioned a philosophical system which, as a system, opposed Aquinas' system, to be sure, yet both theirs and his were foreign to that mystery of Divine Revelation.

"Makrakis didn't believe in the Holy Trinity?" protests one of his disciples, "Why, he proved Its existence by three methods: 1) the deductive 2) the inductive and 3) the psychological." Behold the rationalism of Makrakis, write his critics. Philosophical and scientific proofs of the existence of the Holy Trinity! Behold how the great Mystery — the Mystery *par excellence* — of the Holy Trinity, which cannot be fathomed by either angels or men, is explained and demonstrated and Its existence proven by "rational" methods.

Both these rationalisms are manifestly foreign to the spirit of the Scriptures and the Fathers. Both are the children of human wisdom by which "the world knew not God." They are the products of "Greek wisdom" as opposed to "the foolishness of preaching." We who are Greeks by race renounced the "wisdom" of our forefathers so that we might acquire St. Paul's foolishness, and here the Latins in the West - via the Moslem universities in Spain -went and returned again like dogs to the vomit of Aristotle, and preferred a man's wisdom to God's "foolishness." Indeed, of the two, the "theistic rationalists" are by far the more dangerous, for they come in the name of God. They come with their deductive, inductive and psychological proofs of the existence of the Holy Trinity. After all, say the theistic rationalists, the Scriptures are so unsystematic and subjective; everything in them is shrouded in mysterious symbols. The Fathers too have failed miserably in producing any kind of system and order out of all that the Scriptures provide. They revel in the mysteriousness of this and in the incomprehensibility of that. Really! How do you expect to convert and convince people with that kind of foolishness, say the theistic rationalists in their hearts.

But we Christians do not want the musty, constricting and claustrophobic wisdom of men. We delight in the fact that we and our brains are utterly finite and that our God is Wholly Other. We "boast in the Lord" because our God's existence cannot be proven or

disproven by man's two-bit intellect. Thank God, our God is above all that absurdity, and absurdity by any other name is still absurdity and (whether you call it atheistic or theistic) that is what rationalism is as concerns things divine.

Yet, with the dawn of Scholasticism in the West, the absurdity of using rationalism in the realm of theology was not considered absurdity at all; indeed, the "proofs" and/or "disproofs" of the existence of the Holy Trinity were taken in dead earnest. No one in the West seemed to understand that all their arguments, both pro and con, were totally irrelevant to the Christian Faith which, in contrast, sought to bring man to faith and knowledge — not the knowledge of corruptible man, but the knowledge which "passeth all understanding."

The Scholastics concluded that since human reason is something created by God, the human mind must, therefore, be somewhat analogous to God's mind. But this line of thinking is altogether faulty; for, God's reason is *infinite* and *uncreated*, whereas man's reason is, by contrast, *finite* and *created*. Yes, we are created in the image and likeness of God, but we are *created and finite* images nonetheless. Let us suppose, for example, that the entire history of mankind is contained within the length of the line below:



And let us suppose, further, that the beginning of the twenty-first century after Christ is approximately where the asterisk is.

Now, a human being placed on that line near the asterisk can see the past [the left side of the asterisk] fairly well, at least for a short distance. He cannot see into the future [the right side of the asterisk] at all. His perspective is limited by the fact that he is a mere speck on that [for him] very long line.

But suppose that God is looking at that same line from a short distance away — say, a foot away. He can see the whole length of the line at once.

Obviously, the perspective of the two — God's and man's — is very different. God can see the entire length at a glance; man, in contrast, can see only a tiny fraction of one part.

That is why the Holy Scriptures instruct us, "My thoughts are not your thoughts" [Esaias 55:8]; and, "Who hath known the mind of the Lord?" [Rom. 11:34].

That is why, when we hear expressions such as, "Why would God do such a thing?" or "Is this just or right on the part of God?" we understand immediately that we are dealing with people who think that their perspective of things is essentially the same as God's. But this is a fruit of their faulty theology. It is a typical by-product of the Scholastic way of thinking: Our reasoning and God's reasoning are analogous.

But, as we have seen, they are not at all analogous.

Perhaps the best Orthodox Christian response to the Scholastics' view of such faulty analogies is St. Isaac of Syria's teaching on the different levels of knowledge.

Many Fathers of the Church have written on the subject of knowledge. However, in the *Ascetical Homilies* of St. Isaac of Syria, we find this whole question set forth in a very concise and explicit manner. St. Isaac explains that

Knowledge is a gift bestowed by God on the nature of rational beings at their very creation. It is naturally simple and undivided, even as the light of the sun, but according to its activity knowledge undergoes changes and divisions.

(Homily 52)

St. Isaac then sets forth the three types, or degrees, of knowledge, which the Fathers refer to as contranatural, natural, and supranatural knowledge.

The first degree, or contranatural, knowledge, writes St. Isaac, embraces the following provisions: wealth, vainglory, honour, adornment, rest of the body, special means to guard the body's nature from adversities, assiduity in rational wisdom, such as is suitable for the governance of the world and which gushes forth the novelties of inventions, the arts, sciences, and all other things which crown the body in this visible world. Among the properties of this knowledge belong those that are opposed to faith. This is called shallow knowledge, for it is naked of all concern for God, . . . and its concern is totally for this world. This measure of knowledge does not reckon that there is any noetic power and hidden steersman over a man, nor any Divine care that shelters and takes concern for him. It takes no account of God's providential governance; but on the contrary, it attributes to a man's diligence and his methods every good thing.

(Homily 52)

So, the first degree of knowledge, insofar as it concerns itself solely with the things of earth, is, to no one's surprise, earthly knowledge, and as such "renders the soul cold towards efforts to walk according to God." This is the knowledge which St. Paul is speaking of when he says that "Knowledge puffeth man up." Because of this, it can become blasphemous knowledge. It is what we would refer to today as the arts, technology and the various sciences, including everything from psychology, space technology and the theory of evolution to organic farming and pollution control. As a Greek by race, I like to refer to it as "Greek wisdom."* Even philosophy is referred to by the Fathers as "carnal wisdom," which makes one wonder where this leaves Scholastic

*A sample of Greek "wisdom: Aristotle believed that the brain was in no way involved in the thinking process. (This may be true for some people.) He asserted that it merely served to cool the blood, like some sort of radiator.

"theology," since, via Aquinas and the rest, it rests so heavily on Aristotle. I might mention that the only true "philosophy" which the Church Fathers acknowledge is the life of virtue, and especially, the monastic life, which they refer to also as the "angelic" or "apostolic" life.

The second degree of knowledge, continues St. Isaac, is attained "when a man *renounces* the first degree." As a result of this renunciation, he becomes occupied with thoughts and desires of the soul; then, in the light of the nature of his soul, he practices the following excellent deeds: fasting, prayer, mercy, reading of the Divine Scriptures, virtuous life, battle with the passions and the rest.... At the same time, this knowledge also shows to the heart the ways which lead us to faith, wherewith we gather supplies for the journey into the true world. But even so, this knowledge is still corporeal and composite; and although it is the road that leads us and speeds us on our way toward faith, yet there remains a degree of knowledge still higher than it.

(*Homily 52*)

From what St. Isaac writes, therefore, it is quite clear that even the second degree of knowledge, excellent though it be, does not yet bring us to faith. To be sure, writes St. Isaac, "it is by this knowledge that all that is most beautiful is performed; indeed, it is called the knowledge of actions, because by sensory actions, through the senses of the body, it does its work [i.e., fasting, praying, etc.] on the external level."

(*Ibid.*)

So, as one can see, the arts, technology, psychology, organic farming, the theory of evolution and even philosophy ("carnal wisdom") have been left far behind, "renounced," and we are engaged in "fasting, prayer, mercy, reading of the Divine Scriptures," the keeping of the commandments, etc., etc., and still, we have not yet attained to faith, to perfect knowledge.

"The third degree of knowledge," continues St. Isaac, "is the degree of perfection." A man who is caught up in the realm of this knowledge "comes to resemble the life of the unseen hosts." It is a knowledge which "soars above earthly things and the cares of earthly activities," and which "begins to gain experience in inward matters which are hidden from the eyes," and "searches deeply into hidden mysteries."

But even more importantly, explains St. Isaac, the knowledge bestowed by Divine power is called supranatural; *it is more unfathomable and higher than knowledge*. The perception of this knowledge comes to the soul not from matter, which is outside it, as is the case with the first two kinds of knowledge; it manifests and reveals itself in the innermost depths of the soul itself, immaterially,

suddenly, spontaneously and unexpectedly, since, according to the words of Christ, "the Kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17:21). . . . The first kind of knowledge results from constant and diligent work of learning; the second results from right living and the faith that is a result of our intellect; the third is given only to the faith which sets aside knowledge and puts an end to actions.

(Homily 52)

Lest there should be any misunderstandings, St. Isaac also makes clear what he means by the term "faith." He writes,

By faith we mean not that wherewith a man believes in the distinctions of the divine and worship Hypostases, in the singular and unique nature of the very Godhead, and in the wondrous dispensation to mankind through the assumption of our nature, although this faith is also very lofty. But we call faith that light which by grace dawns in the soul and which fortifies the heart by the testimony of the mind, making it undoubting through the assurance of hope that is remote from all conceit. This faith manifests itself not by aural tradition, but with spiritual eyes it beholds the mysteries concealed in the soul, and the secret and divine riches that are hidden away from the eyes of the sons of the flesh, but are unveiled by the Spirit to those who abide at Christ's table through their study of His laws. Thus He said, 'If ye keep my commandments, I will send you the Comforter, the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, and He shall teach you all truth' (John 14:17, 26).

(Homily 52)

It is clear, therefore, from what St. Isaac has written that the third degree of knowledge, or "suprarnatural knowledge," in reality "is more unfathomable and higher than knowledge," as he himself explains. Indeed, since it transcends knowledge as we know it, it is something other than knowledge; it is Divine revelation. It is that awareness which a man receives when he is visited by Divine grace. It is the "Kingdom of God" hidden within a man. It is God visiting and speaking to His Prophets, Apostles, Martyrs, and God-bearing Fathers with "words that cannot be uttered." It is that illumination by which God's mysteries are revealed to a man; and if a man attempts to articulate them as he experienced and "heard" them, he finds that he cannot. Therefore, seeing the infirmity of his powers of expression and the gross nature of our human speech, he cries with the Prophet-King David, "I said in mine ecstasy, every man is a liar" (Ps. 115:11).

Yet, in spite of the severe limitations set upon it by our earth-bound language, it is this "knowledge" which is set forth in part in the Divine Scriptures. Since the created cannot give adequate expression to the Uncreated, it is, precisely for this reason why the Fathers of the Church do not interpret the Scriptures in a Fundamentalistic and literalistic manner.

But there is another equally important aspect to this knowledge-transcending, supernatural knowledge: it can by no means be either defended or attacked, proven or unproven, upheld or refuted by either of the first two types of knowledge. For no matter how laudable the second degree of knowledge may be, it, together with first degree knowledge, is still in the realm of the created, whereas the third is very different; it is of the Uncreated. This latter "knowledge" (which we also call "grace", "revelation", "the Kingdom of God", "providence", "unapproachable light", "uncreated energy", etc.) "comes to the soul," St. Isaac explains, "not from matter, which is outside it, as is the case with the first two kinds of knowledge," but rather from the Unmaterial and Infinite One Himself. It is radically different from the first two types. It is Wholly Other. It is as different from the first two types as we are from God. It is incomprehensible knowledge. Or, as the Prophet Esaias asks, "Who hath known the mind of the Lord, and who hath been His counselor?" (Isa. 40:13). And again, further down, he writes,

"For even as the Heavens are distant from the earth, so are My ways distant from your ways, and My thoughts from your thoughts" (Isa. 55:9).

To help make this distinction even clearer, St. Gregory Palamas sets down the principle of the Wholly Otherness of God in very lucid terms. God transcends even our very notions and concepts of being and existence and substance, and therefore, writes St. Gregory,

All (created) natures are in the highest degree distant from and foreign to the Divine Nature. For if God is a nature, then no other thing is a nature; but if all others are natures, then God is not a nature; *just as He does not exist if other things exist; but if He exists, then other things do not exist.*

(Migne, PG 150. P. 1176)

By this daring expression, St. Gregory shows how far removed God is from even our *concept* of "existence." God is so Different, so Foreign, to anything we know or comprehend, if He exists, we do not exist! And again, by the same token, if we exist, then He does not exist, if we are talking about existence as we know and understand it. (And just stop to think for a moment where this leaves Makrakis with his inductive, deductive and psychological proofs of the existence of the Holy Trinity!)

It is this God, therefore, Who is the Source of that "knowledge" which St. Isaac and the Fathers call "supernatural" and which also is revealed *in part* both in the Holy Scriptures and in the writings of the Holy Fathers.

This knowledge cannot be proven or disproven by human science. Indeed, *human science, "first degree knowledge," is wholly removed and irrelevant to that supernal knowledge which is revealed in Holy Scripture.*

Both Rationalists and Fundamentalists are trying to prove/disprove Uncreated Knowledge by created knowledge. Both are trying to uphold/refute the mysteries of the

Infinite by finite means. And ultimately, both are trying to defend/attack God by groveling human arguments. But, as St. Justin the Philosopher points out in his *Dialogue with Trypho*,

[The Prophets] did not use demonstrations in their treatises, seeing that they were witnesses to that truth which is above all demonstration, and worthy of belief.

(Chap. VIII)

Fundamentalism

And now, this brings us to the issue of "Fundamentalism." What is Fundamentalism?

The term "Fundamentalist" was coined in 1923, and was a movement in American "orthodox" Protestantism which upheld "strict adherence to traditional orthodox [*sic*] tenets [e.g., the literal inerrancy of Scripture] held to be fundamental to the Christian faith" [*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 2d ed., s. v. "fundamentalists"].

The *New Oxford American Dictionary* says the following:

A form of Protestant Christianity that upholds belief in the strict and literal interpretation of the Bible, including its narratives, doctrines, prophecies, and moral laws.

Modern Christian fundamentalism arose from American millenarian sects of the 19th century, and has become associated with reaction against social and political liberalism and rejection of the theory of evolution. Islamic fundamentalism appeared in the 18th and 19th centuries as a reaction to the disintegration of Islamic political and economic power, asserting that Islam is central of both state and society and advocating strict adherence to the Koran (*Qur'an*) and to Islamic law (*sharia*), supported if need be by jihad or holy war.

We see that, for a variety of reasons, the *Oxford American Dictionary* did not name Orthodox Christianity in its definition of "Fundamentalism."

We see also that Fundamentalism and a literal interpretation of the Holy Scriptures are equated here.

The Church's approach is not like this.

To understand our Orthodox Church's approach better, let us suppose that one were standing on a beach, on the shore of a great sea, gazing out over the vast expanse of water. If he were unable to swim, or venture out into the water, he would see before him

an enormous, glittering expanse of water, sparkling in the sun. Since this is all he can see from his vantage point, given his lack of ability to swim, or his timidity in venturing deeper into the water, he might be tempted to think that what he was seeing on the surface is all there is to see and know about the body of water before him.

On the other hand, if he were to pluck up courage and wade deeper into the waves, and stick his head under the surface, and if the waters were crystal-clear as they are in the Mediterranean or the Caribbean, he would be amazed at what he saw! A whole different world would reveal itself to him, — one which he never would have anticipated if he had remained on the shore. All sorts of creatures and strange plants would appear before him, of which he had no inkling before the moment he plunged his head under the surface!

Let us carry this analogy further.

Suppose the same man were equipped with a diving suit and a supply of oxygen from the surface. In such a case, he could descend much deeper, perhaps a hundred or more feet into the sea. As his eyes grew accustomed to the dim light in those depths, he would see many more strange and exotic creatures and plants. Perhaps he might discover sunken treasures or lost artifacts from ancient and unknown civilizations.

If we were to give him a submarine, or, even better, a bathysphere, then he could really plumb the depths! Armed with spotlights to help him illumine the everlasting darkness of those depths, what would our well-equipped explorer find? Fish with no eyes [what good would they do in that realm of utter blackness?] Plants that have never seen the sun, and yet thrive and grow.

His understanding of what the ocean held within its bosom would be very different indeed from that of the man who had not ventured from the beach and who saw only the ocean's surface.

In such a way also would the understanding of the Scriptures of one who follows in the footsteps of the Saints differ from the understanding of a Fundamentalist.

Some years ago, one young convert to Orthodox Christianity wrote that Saint Basil the Great was "rather well known for his extreme literalness as far as Scripture was concerned."

In fact, in our readings of St. Basil we have not encountered this "extreme literalness."

If one were to come to the conclusion that the Saint interprets literally because, in his Ninth Homily of the *Hexaemeron*, he attacks the Origenists, who used to allegorize everything in the Holy Scriptures, then one would miss his point. For St. Basil is here not attacking those who profess that our human language is inadequate in expressing the fullness of God's mysteries (for if he were, he would be attacking himself, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Gregory the Theologian and every other Father of the Church), but rather those

who take all the words of Scripture and say that these words mean something else, — that they always have another "mystical" meaning. Yet, even allegory has its place, since St. Basil himself uses it, as does his brother, St. Gregory of Nyssa, and many other Fathers. St. Paul uses it in Galatians 4:24. So obviously, St. Basil is here condemning, not the use of allegory, but its abuse. But this is different from what we are talking about. In actuality, in this very work, i.e. the *Hexaemeron*, in discussing what is meant by the term "pillars" or "foundations" which support the earth, the Saint writes,

If ever you hear in the Psalms, "I bear up the pillars of it (i.e. the earth)," see in these pillars the power which sustains it. Because what means this other passage, "He hath founded it upon the sea," (Psalm 24: 2) if not that the water is spread all around the earth? How then can water, the fluid element which flows down every declivity, remain suspended without ever flowing? . . . But let us admit that the earth rests upon itself, or let us say that it rides on the waters, nevertheless *we must remain faithful to the thought of true religion and recognize that all is sustained by the Creator's power.*
(*Hexaemeron* I: 9)

This is neither a literal nor an allegorical interpretation of Holy Scripture. He is simply telling us what the word "pillar" really means here. When we read in Genesis 3 that Adam heard God walking in the garden of delight, do we understand this to mean that God had feet, whose footsteps could be heard? When God asked Adam, "Adam, where art thou?" does this mean that God was ignorant of the former's whereabouts and that He had a voice like ours? Again, St. Basil writes concerning this point:

It must be well understood that when we speak of the voice, of the word, of the command of God, this divine language does not mean to us a sound which escapes from the organs of speech, a collision of air struck by the tongue; it is a simple sign of the will of God, and, if we give it the form of an order, *it is only the better to impress the souls whom we instruct.*

(*Ibid.*, II: 7)

When Genesis speaks of the "days" of creation, is it speaking in Fundamentalist terms, or in Scriptural terms? In Psalm 89:4, for example, we read: "For a thousand years in Thine eyes, O Lord, are but as yesterday that is past, and a watch in the night." In II Peter 3:8 we see the following, "But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day."

In his second homily of *The Hexaemeron*, St. Basil explains the meaning of the term "one day" used in Genesis, and he says, "Whether you call it day, or whether you call it an eon (Gr. *aión*), you express the same idea. . . Thus, it is in order that you may carry your thoughts forward towards a future life, that the Scripture [Gen. 1:5] marks by the word 'one' the day which is the type of eternity. . . ." (Mind you, this is *before* the

creation of the sun! How can one speak of literal twenty-four hour days when the Holy Scriptures tell us clearly that there's no sun yet?!)

No "extreme literalness" here. Our young convert was worried that others would believe that "the Word of God is not exactly true," which, from the context of his letter, he apparently means "exactly true" in its "literal" sense.

St. Basil sets forth his own basic principles of how we should approach the Holy Scriptures with a right understanding:

It will not lead me to give less importance to the creation of the universe, that the servant of God, Moses, is silent as to shapes; he has not said that the earth is a hundred and eighty thousand furlongs in circumference; he has not measured into what extent of air its shadow projects itself whilst the sun revolves around it, nor stated how this shadow, casting itself upon the moon, produces eclipses. *He has passed over in silence, as useless, all that is unimportant to us. Shall I then prefer foolish wisdom to the oracles of God? Should I not rather exalt Him Who, not wishing to fill our minds with these vanities, has regulated all the economy of Scripture in view of the edification and the making perfect of our souls?*

(Hexaemeron IX, 1)

In other words, the Saint is telling us that we are not to look at the Holy Scriptures as a "first-degree knowledge," scientific textbook, but as a doctrinal and moral compass in our life.

Further, I believe that we can understand what "absurd conclusions" (as St. Gregory of Nyssa calls them) we can draw from the Holy Scriptures on the basis of "extreme literalness." For Scripture informs us that God had not only feet with which He walked in the garden of delight, but He also had hands with which He fashioned the earth and man. Holy Writ informs us repeatedly that He has a face; that He has ears. The Psalms inform us that He has a sword "which He will furbish," so presumably, He has arms and hips. We address Him as "Our Father," therefore His body is masculine; and if we are made in His (masculine) image and likeness, how then does one account for the existence of women? And, finally, Moses saw God's "back parts." (As I mentioned earlier, St. Gregory of Nyssa, in his *Life of Moses*, is quite explicit on this point: "If then we were to take this text about God's back parts literally, we would be logically forced into an absurd conclusion.") Well, what can one say? Looking at Scripture through the prism of "extreme literalness," one could write quite an exegetical work. Perhaps he could name it "The Divine Anatomy" or perhaps "Heavenly Bodies." Ludicrous, and even blasphemous? Well, are we aware that this is exactly how the Mormons envision God? Yes, God — for them — is a giant, with all the physical attributes we have, except on an infinitely larger scale. So, as one can see, using "extreme literalness" can get one into the wrong company.

Granted that God does not have feet and that He did know where Adam was hiding, why would one allow a non-literal interpretation of Genesis three and insist on a literal understanding of Genesis one, especially since the Fathers, as I have shown in brief, do not. Indeed, if the Scripture uses such images at all, it is only that it thus may "better impress the souls whom we instruct," as St. Basil points out. But why this admiration of "extreme literalness" and from whence did some receive the impression that Orthodox Christians understand the Scriptures basically in a literal sense? This is the error of the Moslems who believed that the Koran descended *verbatim* from Heaven (could it have been they who — through their universities in Spain — influenced the Latin "theistic rationalists" and, through them, the Protestants and Fundamentalists?). This is the error of the Masoretic Jews, who counted the words and syllables of every Old Testament book to make sure that no one tampered with the "exact revealed text" (and then they made sure to destroy any manuscript that had variant readings). This is the error of textual critics, both Latin and Protestant, who, in order to establish the "original text," quibble over one-syllable articles (and then "demythologize" and dismiss the whole thing as fancy and fairy tales).

Surely, one can get himself into serious doctrinal trouble if he insists on a literal understanding of Holy Writ. For, if "no man can see God and live," how then does the holy Apostle Peter dare to pray that his disciples become "partakers of the Divine Nature?" Indeed, the thought that God's mysteries, which transcend the very realm of created being, can be adequately expressed by any created means, including the written and spoken word, is distinctly foreign to patristic thought. On this point, St. Gregory of Nyssa writes:

. . . . human speech finds it impossible to express the reality which transcends all thought and all concept; and he who obstinately tries to express it in words, unconsciously offends God.

(*Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, Homily 7)

But even the Divine Scriptures themselves warn us of the dangers of a literal interpretation. Again, St. Gregory of Nyssa writes,

Lifted out of himself by the Spirit, (the Prophet David) glimpsed in that blessed ecstasy God's infinite and incomprehensible beauty. He saw as much as a mere mortal can see, leaving the covering of the flesh, and by thought alone entering into the divine vision of that immaterial and spiritual realm. And though yearning to say something which would do justice to his vision, he can only cry out (in words that all can echo after him): *I said in mine ecstasy, every man is a liar* (Psalm 177:11). And this I take to mean that anyone who attempts to portray that ineffable Light in language *is truly a liar* — not because of any abhorrence of the truth, but merely because of the infirmity of his explanation.

(From the *Homily On Virginity*)

The writings of the Holy Fathers have a great many insights to give us when we are reading the Holy Scriptures. For example, in his homily *On the Annunciation*, St. Gregory Palamas tells us, "Concerning Him that created, [Moses] spoke; concerning the manner of how those things came to be, he did not speak." This statement alone negates the Fundamentalist's approach to the Holy Scriptures.

St. Seraphim of Sarov, in the *Conversation with Motovilov*, has this to say about the creation of Adam:

Many explain that when it says in the Bible, "God breathed the breath of life into the face of Adam the first created, — who was created by Him from the dust of the ground," it must mean that until then there was neither human soul nor spirit in Adam, but only the flesh created from the dust of the ground. This interpretation is wrong, for the Lord created Adam from the dust of the ground with the constitution which our dear little father, the holy Apostle Paul describes: "May your spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Thess. 5:23). And all these parts of our nature were created from the dust of the ground, and Adam *was not created dead, but an active being like all the other animate creatures of God living on earth*. The point is that if the Lord God had not breathed afterwards into his face this breath of life (i.e., the grace of our Lord God the Holy Spirit, Who proceeds from the Father and rests in the Son, and is sent into the world for the Son's sake), Adam would have remained without having within him the Holy Spirit Who raises him to Godlike dignity. *However perfect he had been created and superior to all the other creatures of God, as the crown of creation on earth, he would have been just like all the other creatures which though they have a body, soul and spirit, each according to its kind, yet have not the Holy Spirit within them*. But when the Lord God breathed into Adam's face the breath of life, then, according to Moses' word, Adam became a living soul (Gen. 2:7), that is, completely and in every way like God, and, like Him, forever immortal.

So contrary to the impression that a Fundamentalist interpretation might give us, St. Seraphim points out that "Adam was not created dead, but an active being like all the other animate creatures of God living on earth." Furthermore, the Saint points out that if Adam had not received the in-breathing of the Holy Spirit, he would have been just like all the other creatures" which also have a body, soul and spirit.*

* For a patristic understanding of the terms "body," "soul," and "spirit," see the article "Concerning Apostolos Makrakis," published in the St. Nectarios Educational Series by the parish of St. Nectarios in Seattle, Washington.

St. Athanasius the Great throws another wrench into a Fundamentalist interpretation of this passage. In one of his epistles defending the Nicene Council, the Saint writes:

For [Adam] was formed from earth, *even as all men are*; and the hand which fashioned Adam then, the same again even now and forever fashions and molds together those that came after him.
(Migne, *PG* 25. P. 438-39)

The Arians were using the argument that, though all men came from Adam, Adam was fashioned from the earth, whereas his children were not. Therefore, Adam's children are not really of the same nature as Adam. Likewise, argued the Arians, though the Son comes from the Father, yet He is not of the same essence as the Father. And St. Athanasius answers the Arians with the above-mentioned quote, adding also that, if the Arians wished to see for themselves if man is, in truth, made from the earth, they should pay a visit to the graveyards and dig around a bit.

In the Sixth Question of his work *Amphilochia*, St. Photius the Great makes this very interesting observation:

The divine Moses left out many things that are spiritually perceived. . . . for, in view of the grossness and infirmity of those that heard him, it is not marvelous that the seer of God did not go into the creation of the Bodiless Hosts, nor did he set forth an explanation of the Kingdom of the Heavens, which transcends the senses; for the people yet lived according to their senses, and not according to divine vision.

So we see here that, not only the groveling nature of human speech, but even the "grossness and infirmity" of those to whom the Divine oracle is spoken can be a hindrance to what is revealed to us in the Divine Scriptures.

The point here is: We must not get caught in the same snare as the Fundamentalists and atheist scientists, *both* of whom seek to interpret the Scriptures in a literalistic manner. Because if we do, then we too, as well as they, are contradicting St. Gregory Palamas, who as we quoted above, teaches us that "concerning Him that created, [Moses] spoke; concerning the manner of how those things came to be, he did not speak." More importantly, we are missing the intent of the Holy Scriptures.

St. Dionysius the Areopagite also has some remarkable observations to make about those who look at the Scriptures through the prism of literalism. He writes:

Let no one imagine that we celebrate the Divine Name of Love without Scriptural authority, for it is, I consider, unreasonable and foolish to pay attention to the letter rather than to the spirit, nor is this the method of those who wish for insight into Divine

things, but rather of those who receive empty sounds and prevent them from passing beyond their ears, not wishing to know the inner significance, nor how to explain them more clearly in terms of similar meaning, but they confine themselves to meaningless arrangements of letters, uncomprehended syllables and words which do not penetrate into the intelligence of their souls, but buzz outside, around their lips and ears, just as though it were not permitted to explain the number four by calling it twice two, or a straight line by calling it a direct line, or the motherland by calling it the fatherland, or any other name which has the same significance, using many different words. It is necessary to know, according to right reason, that we use sounds and syllables and phrases on account of our senses, since when our soul is moved by noetic energies to that which is noetically perceived, both the senses and that which they perceive are surpassed, just as in turn are the noetic powers of the soul, which having become Godlike, casts itself, in the union of unknowing, upon the Rays of the Ineffable Light, in sightless vision of the Divine.

(*Divine Names*, chap. IV)

In his other work, *The Celestial Hierarchies*, St. Dionysius discusses those who take the Scriptural utterances literalistically and he fears for the pious,

lest we, like the many, might impiously suppose that Celestial and Divine Intelligences are many-footed or many-faced beings, or formed with the brutishness of oxen, or the savageness of lions, or the curved beaks of eagles, or the feathers of birds, or might imagine that they are some kind of fiery wheels above the Heavens, or material thrones upon which the Supreme Deity may recline, or many-colored horses; or commanders of armies, or whatever else of symbolic description has been given to us in the various sacred images of the Scriptures.

(Chap. II)

Indeed, continues the Saint, such a view would "lead our minds into error,"

for we might even think that the supercelestial regions are filled with herds of lions and horses, and re-echo with roaring songs of praise, and contain flocks of birds and other creatures, and the lower forms of matter, and whatever other absurd, spurious, passion-arousing, and unlike forms the Scriptures use in describing their (i.e., the Angels') resemblances.

(Chap. II)

If created mankind's words in the Holy Bible do not give adequate expression to God's mysteries, the truth is that they don't give adequate expression to any of God's

deeds ("I said in mine ecstasy, every man is a liar."). If the Scriptural accounts do not contain the literal "whole truth" of the Fundamentalists, the truth is that the Church perceives in the Scriptures many levels of understanding ("Moses beheld the back parts of God," and "The Lord God called and said, 'Adam, where art thou?"). If we do not look to the literalistically-understood Scriptural text as our source of "first degree knowledge," the truth is that the Bible is not meant to be a science textbook ("Shall I then prefer foolish wisdom to the oracles of God?").

One final thing to bear in mind is that the Holy Scriptures very often are to be understood in a symbolic or allegorical sense in addition to or aside from the historical meaning. And, in fact, the Holy Scriptures *do* contain "super" or "upper" or "supra" truths *very* often. For, as St. John Cassian puts it in his *Conferences*,

. . . the one and the same Jerusalem can be taken in four senses: historically, the city of the Jews; allegorically, as the Church of Christ; anagogically, as the heavenly city of God "which is the mother of us all"; and tropologically, as the soul of man, which is frequently subject to praise or blame from the Lord under this title.

(*First Conference of Abba Nesteros*, chap. 8)

What does all this teach us? That it is indeed necessary for us to "follow in the footsteps of the Holy Fathers" faithfully, and not follow after our own private interpretations.

In his *Conferences*, St. John Cassian the Roman tells us, "a man cannot possibly be deceived, if he lives not by his own judgment, but according to the example of the elders" (*Second Conference of Abba Moses*, chap. 10).

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Most of us, I believe, would agree that we do not yet fall into the category of the pure in heart. As a consequence of that shortcoming, our vision of God is impaired by the heavy pollution in our personal spiritual firmament. And from another angle, we are warned and counseled by the Megalynarion of the Feast of the Annunciation of the Mother of God (March 25): "Let the hand of the uninitiated in no wise touch the living Ark of God." For centuries, Orthodox Catholic Christians have been taught to tread cautiously and with fear when we approach things that pertain to the mysteries of God. For the impure and the uninstructed, such as ourselves, the mysteries of God are a terrain strewn with many landmines that destroy undiscerning souls that rush into this territory where even angels fear to tread.

The Holy Scriptures a terrain strewn with landmines? Let us listen to what the scholar, Father Michael G. H. Gelsinger, Ph. D., (in the monastic tonsure, Theodore, monk) has to say in his treatise, "The Creed.":

The doctrine of universal competence to interpret Scripture means that theoretically there could be as many different Churches as there

are people. But, in practice, the great majority of Protestants are contented merely with the recognition of their right to private interpretation, and do not take the trouble to exercise the right in any systematic fashion. Rather, they form organizations under the leadership, past or present, of the more active minds among them who actually have engaged in interpretation to work out statements of belief for which they have sought to win adherents.

Originally, the older Protestant denominations had separate and distinctive interpretations of the Gospel and Creed to serve as some justification for their separate existences, and they showed great enthusiasm and vigor in maintaining their special beliefs. But because all of the denominations were based on the doctrine that each individual can construct his own beliefs according to his own ideas, it was impossible for any single denomination to claim forthrightly that it alone was the one true Church. For this reason Protestant theologians took the line that the one true Church includes everyone who belongs to Christ, regardless of membership in a particular organization, and that Christ alone can truly tell who they are. The ONE Church, they said, is invisible.

At the very heart of Protestantism, therefore, is planted in germ the popular modern idea that anyone can believe as he pleases, and on his own sole authority. Because no one knows who or what is right, the Church, composed of those who are right, must be invisible. And if the Church is invisible, with its members scattered among all denominations, and known only to Christ, who could oppose the idea that a believer's chances are likely to be as good in one denomination as in another? Indeed, those who believe that one denomination is as good as another often believe also that the chances of Mohammedans and Buddhists are likewise good enough. And Sunday School Lessons have appeared which present heathen religions as quaintly different and interesting, but not as clearly and positively wrong.

By our time, the earlier enthusiastic particularism of the Protestant sects has disappeared. They are mostly indistinguishable from one another, because freedom to believe as one pleases means freedom to believe in not very much. They all tend to believe as little as possible and to subtract continually even from that little. So, inevitably the doctrine that each person can be his own supreme authority in religion is working itself out into sheer atheism for an increasing number of people. If it doesn't matter what church you belong to, how can it matter if you don't belong

to any church at all? If it doesn't matter which or how many churches you reject, how can it matter if you reject them all? If it doesn't matter what you believe about Christ, how can it matter if you don't believe anything at all about Him, or even if you deny that He ever existed, as many have done? Of course, in their progress toward atheism people move without haste — they may begin with broad-minded questioning of the Virgin Birth of our Lord, and not arrive at denial of the Resurrection until quite a while later.

To put the case plainly, the reasoning which leads to the doctrine that the Church is invisible, must also lead finally to denial of the Church invisible, as well as of the Church visible, for all minds that do not stop thinking. And in due time comes the denial, first of Providence, and at last of God's own existence.

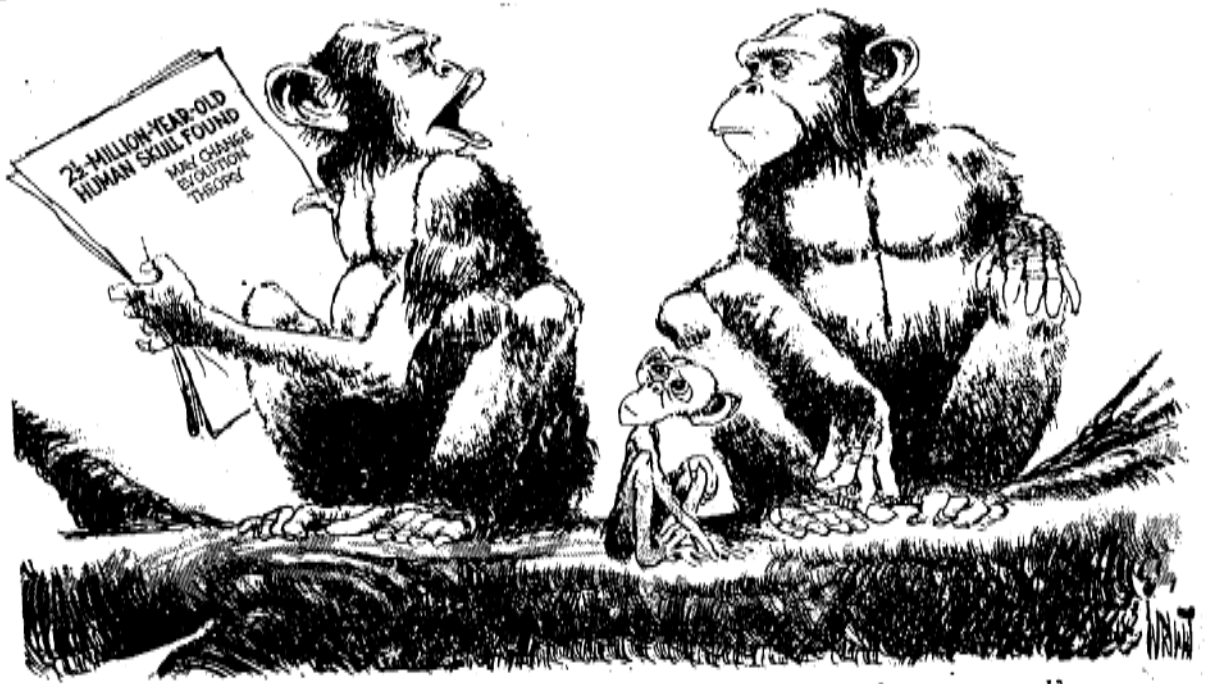
According to recent surveys, Protestantism has disintegrated into over 28,000 denominations and sects, which are increasing by an average of five every week, thanks, primarily, to their "private interpretations." A minefield indeed.

But, if we follow in the footsteps of the God-bearing Fathers, as the Definition of the Fourth Ecumenical Council advises us, we shall tread in the steps of those who have safely reached the other side. So be it.

An Important Afterthought

For the majority of us, perhaps the most significant exposure we have to patristic interpretations of the Holy Scriptures are the Church's holy services; for many of the divine services were either composed or inspired by the Holy Fathers. One prominent Orthodox theologian of the twentieth century, Father George Florovsky, never attended a theological academy or seminary as a student. His *entire* theological education was drawn from the sacred services, where he heard the Holy Scriptures and also their grace-filled interpretations by the God-bearing Saints in the Church's hymnology.

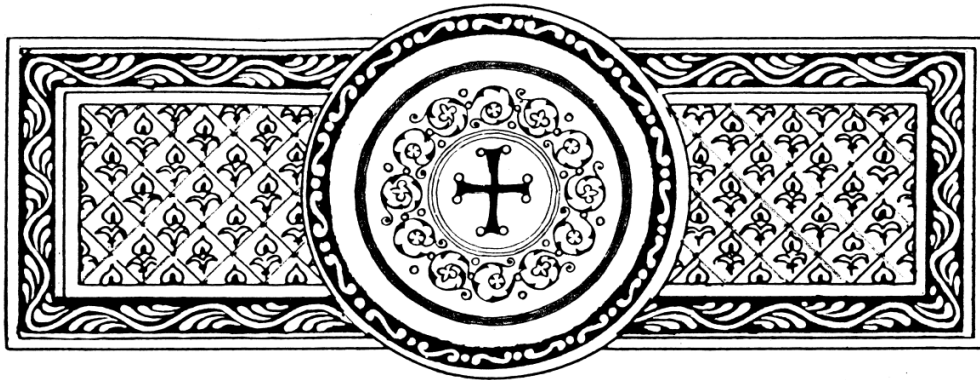
Lex orandi; lex credendi.



'I hope this lays to rest any notion that we're related to those savages!'



This is the front cover of a Seventh Day Adventist publication (the Seventh Day Adventists are a Fundamentalist sect). As we can see, Adam is built like a Greek god. He is obviously Caucasian, but has a deep Hawaiian-type tan. He has dark wavy locks (not a hair is out of place) and he has a dimple in his chin. His teeth look like they've been capped by a Hollywood make-up artist (notice also the animal skin that he is wearing in the style of Tarzan). Eve is a lithesome blonde with plucked eyebrows. She is wearing a red flower in her hair. Her fur apparel (designed by Dior?) is a soft blue (dyed mink, perhaps). Little Abel (Good Heavens! it couldn't be Cain, could it?) is a chubby, bubbly, and pink little darling with wavy blond hair, neatly parted. Naturally, he has blue eyes. The tropical setting is lush and idyllic. They are very happy. Which makes one wonder: Has the Fall taken place yet? (If it didn't, then how in the world did they ever get little Cain, or Abel, or whatever the little dear's name is?)



I do not know how I came into the world,
Nor what the things here in it really are.
What my sight is, O my God,
And what the objects that I see, I cannot tell.
How all men are vain,
And have no proper judgment of reality!
Yesterday at least I came, and tomorrow I shall go,
And I think to be immortal yonder.
That Thou art my God I confess to everyone,
And yet deny Thee daily in my deeds.
I teach that Thou hast made each living thing,
And yet without Thee struggle to have all.
Thy rule extends above, below,
And yet I do not fear to strive against Thee.
Let me, the needy one, the most miserable,
Unburden all the sickness of my soul.
Crushed, alas, and broken into bits
By vanity, by foolish arrogance.
Grant me to be humble, grant me a hand of help,
And cleanse my soul's pollution.
And give me tears of repentance,
Tears of love, tears of liberty
Tears cleansing my mind's darkness,
And filling me with Heavenly radiance!
For Thee it is, the Light of the world,
The Light of my poor eyes, that I wish to see
I, who fill my heart with life's evils.
St. Symeon the New Theologian