



EARLY CHRISTIAN REPRESENTATIONS OF REALITY

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OUTLINES

- Prologue
- Not of the world, but for it
- The Melodic Harmony of the Cosmos
- Scripture, Tradition and Science
- Description and Interpretation
- Anthropic Representations
- Epilogue

PROLOGUE

- Why studying the early Christian representations of reality?
 - The holistic dimension of the early Christian faith
 - The early Christian worldview as a framework for making sense of our predecessors' faith, attitudes and lifestyle

NOT OF THE WORLD, BUT FOR IT

- An exploration of *Letter to Diognetus* (second half of the second century), particularly chapters 5, 6, 7 and 10
 - Relevant matters
 - “Christians dwell in the world, but are not of the world” (6.3)
 - “in the world, Christians are what the soul is in the body” (6.1)

NOT OF THE WORLD, BUT FOR IT

- More relevant matters. Alongside the paradoxical situation of Christians in the world, the contours of a genuine representation of reality
 - “This is whom [God] sent to them: the very artisan and demiurge of all, who made the skies and confined the sea within its boundaries, whose mysteries all the elements faithfully observe, from whom the sun received the measures of the daily paths which it maintains, the one whose command to show forth the moon obeys at night, whom the stars that follow the path of the moon obey, the one who organised, defined and associated all things, namely, the skies and things celestial, the earth and the earthly things, the sea and things aquatic, [as well as] fire, air, the abyss, [in other words,] things on high, things in the depths, things in between” (7.2)

NOT OF THE WORLD, BUT FOR IT

- More relevant matters. Diognesian worldview was both theocentric and anthropic
- “God loved human beings. He created the cosmos for them and to them has he subjected all things on earth. He gave them reason and mind, and only to them has he appointed to look up to the sky. It is them that he moulded out of his own image and to them has he sent his only-begotten Son. To them he has promised the heavenly kingdom, which he will give to those who love him” (10.2)

NOT OF THE WORLD, BUT FOR IT

- Wisdom
 - The inimical side of the world, i.e. pagan society, led the early Christians to a sense of not belonging in the world
 - The theology of creation inspired a more complex attitude
 - The world was God's creation
 - The world was theologically meaningful
 - All things were made for humankind
 - Christians, as the best part of humankind, had a task to fulfil in the world

THE MELODIC HARMONY OF THE COSMOS

- Select passages from St Ignatius of Antioch, St Irenaeus of Lyon, St Clement the Alexandrian and St Athanasius of Alexandria
- Renditions of the early Christian worldview in ecclesial colours, through liturgical imagery
- God/Christ/Spirit as composer, singer and instrument; the creation as choir, song, instrument and orchestra

THE MELODIC HARMONY OF THE COSMOS

- St Ignatius of Antioch (d. early second century)
- A choral universe
 - “How did he [i.e. Christ] show himself to the eons? A star whose light was ineffable shone in the sky more than all the stars, and its novelty bewildered. All the other stars, along with the sun and the moon, became a chorus for the [new] star whose light surpassed that of all the others. And there was disturbance as to the source of this novelty and unlikeliness to them” (*To the Ephesians* 19.2)

THE MELODIC HARMONY OF THE COSMOS

- St Irenaeus of Lyon (d. early third century)
- The harmony of the world taken as a whole
 - “When each one of the many and various beings that have been made is considered apart from the others, they are contrary and discordant. But, [when they are considered] together with the whole of the creation, they are harmonious and consonant—the way the sound of the lyre, which consists of many and opposite sounds, makes one harmonious melody through the interval pertaining to them” (*Against the Heresies* 2.25.2)

THE MELODIC HARMONY OF THE COSMOS

- St Clement the Alexandrian (d. early third century)
- Cosmic harmony and the human microcosm as a polyphonic instrument
 - “Listen here, he melodiously arrayed the universe by stretching the disharmony of the fundamental elements into the order of a symphony” (*Exhortation to the Gentiles* 1.5.1)
 - “Overlooking the lyre and the harp, soulless instruments, and in the Holy Spirit bringing to harmony this very world and the small cosmos, namely, the human being with its soul and body, the Logos of God plays hymns to God on this polyphonic instrument and sings by way of this instrument, the human being” (*Exhortation to the Gentiles* 1.5.3)

THE MELODIC HARMONY OF THE COSMOS

- St Athanasius of Alexandria (d. 373)
- The theological meaningfulness of cosmic harmony
 - “When one hears from a distance a lyre made of many and various strings, and marvels at the harmony of its symphony, . . . even without seeing the musician [one would infer] that there is someone who knowledgeably combined the sound of each string into a melodious symphony. Likewise, given the perfectly harmonious order within the whole cosmos . . . and the one perfect order of all things, it follows that there should be construed one . . . master and king of the entire creation who by his light shines upon all things and moves them” (*Against to the Gentiles* 38)

THE MELODIC HARMONY OF THE COSMOS

- St Athanasius of Alexandria
- The choral universe
 - “a choir is composed of a variety of people, males, children, women, elderly as well as youngsters. At the sign of the choirmaster, each sings according to his or her nature and capability—the man as a man, the child as a child, the elderly person as an elderly one, the young person as a young one—and all together produce one melody . . . The same goes for the creation in its entirety, even though, weak being the example, one must generalise the notion. Thus, all things are organised in like manner at the quick nod of God’s Logos, each one being produced in its proper way and through all things being achieved, likewise, one order” (*Against to the Gentiles* 43)

THE MELODIC HARMONY OF THE COSMOS

- Wisdom
 - Representations of reality which, while drawing on classical literary patterns, depict the world by way of ecclesial images
 - The universe as a liturgical assembly
 - The musical harmony of the world as a theological hymn

SCRIPTURE, TRADITION AND SCIENCE

- St Basil of Caesarea (d. 379)
- *Homilies on the Hexaemeron*, an interpretation of the days of creation at the crossroads of scriptural exegesis, traditional mystagogy and ancient science
 - Apologetic musings on the days of creation
 - Science fills the gaps in Scripture's theological narrative
 - A theological interpretation of the scientific description of reality

SCRIPTURE, TRADITION AND SCIENCE

- St Basil of Caesarea
 - Apologetic musings on the days of creation
 - “The creation of the sky and the earth must be conveyed not as having happened spontaneously, as some have imagined, but as having their cause from God” (*Hexaemeron* 1.1)

SCRIPTURE, TRADITION AND SCIENCE

- St Basil of Caesarea
 - Science fills the gaps in Scripture's theological narrative
 - “When he [namely, Moses] said, “In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth,” he passed over in silence many things, such as water, air, and fire, out of which [the beings] happen to be produced. All these [elements] which completed the cosmos existed manifestly, without any doubt, but the story left them out so that our mind exercise its skills by inferring the rest from little pointers” (*Hexaemeron* 2.3)

SCRIPTURE, TRADITION AND SCIENCE

- St Basil of Caesarea
 - A theological interpretation of the scientific description of reality
 - “Let us glorify the noble artist for all that wisely and artistically has been done. From the beauty of things visible let us reflect upon the one who is supremely beautiful, and from the majesty of these delimited bodies that are accessible through senses let us make an analogy for the one who is boundless, supremely magnificent, and who surpasses all understanding by the fullness of his power” (*Hexaemeron* 1.11)

SCRIPTURE, TRADITION AND SCIENCE

➤ Wisdom

- Scripture offers a theological vantage point for considering the world in a way profitable for Christians
- The scriptural narrative is not scientific; in fact, science fills the gaps in the Christian narrative
- Theology is called to interpret the scientific description of reality through the scriptural lens, to reveal the meaningfulness of the creation

DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION

- St Gregory of Nyssa (d. ca 395)
- *An Apology for the Hexaemeron*
 - Taking cue from the Basilian *Hexaemeron*, he expanded the scientific dimension in the description of reality
 - Science clarifies the natural phenomena alluded to by Genesis 1
 - Theology interprets reality taking from the viewpoint of Genesis 1

DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION

- St Gregory of Nyssa
- Science clarifies the natural phenomena alluded to by Genesis 1
- “For the completion of beings [created], being wholly mighty [God] forcefully brought together at once all of which matter consists, by a wise and powerful will—lightness [and] heaviness, density [and] perviousness, softness [and] hardness, humidity [and] dryness, coolness [and] hotness, colour, shape, contour, and extension. Taken one by one, all these are mere thoughts and concepts; none of these constitutes matter of its own; but they become matter when they reciprocally converge” (*Apology 7*)

DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION

- St Gregory of Nyssa
- Theology interprets reality taking from the viewpoint of Genesis 1
- “The prophet wrote the book of Genesis as an introduction to divine knowledge. Thus, when through visionary knowledge he divided for us the sky and the earth, the intention of Moses was to lead those enslaved by the senses through things visible to the things that transcend the range of the senses” (*Apology* 8)

DESCRIPTION AND INTERPRETATION

- Wisdom
 - It is never a matter of either/or
 - Science describes, theology interprets
 - Genesis 1 stands between science and theology, as their interface

ANTHROPIC REPRESENTATIONS

- St Gregory of Nyssa (d. ca 395), St John Chrysostom (d. 407)
 - Fourth century authors returned to the Diognesian anthropic motif, developing it
 - The image of the king, the palace and the kingdom as a metaphorical way of making sense of Genesis 1

ANTHROPIC REPRESENTATIONS

➤ St Gregory of Nyssa

- “The human being, that great and honourable thing, had not yet arrived into the world of the [created] beings. It was not befitting for the ruler to be shown forth before those that were to be ruled. However, since the creator of the universe prepared beforehand a royal palace of sorts for the one who would be king in the future—the royal domain being now established—it was orderly that the ruler be revealed. This [royal domain] consisted of the earth, the islands, the sea, and the sky arched, after a manner, like a roof over all these. Great wealth was stored in the treasuries [of the palace]. By wealth I mean the whole of the creation, such as plants and their offshoots, together with many animals endowed with sense, breath, and life. And if we must count as wealth material things, [we have to include] the pleasing things which seem worthwhile to the human eyes, such as gold, silver, and those gems that people love. All these have been discretely stored, with generosity, in the bosom of the earth as though in royal treasuries. Only then was the human being revealed within the world—to be the beholder of the wonders therein and their lord, who, by enjoying them may make sense of the giver and, through the beauty and majesty of the visible things may grasp the ineffable power of the creator who transcends all intellection. It is for this reason that the human being was introduced last, after the [whole of the] creation, not thrown away to the end like a worthless thing, but as one to whom it belonged by birth to be the king of his subjects” (*On the Making of the Human Being 2*)

ANTHROPIC REPRESENTATIONS

- St John Chrysostom

- “Think of a king who is about to enter a city, who is necessarily preceded by spearmen and all the other [courtiers appointed] to ready the royal palace [for his arrival]. Only then [i.e. when all is ready] does the king approach the palace. In our case, likewise, the whole order [of the universe] has been founded before this king and ruler of sorts [i.e. the human being] was about to be installed [as master of] the entire earth. Then [i.e. after the making of the cosmos] was the established [overlord] meant to be introduced. Through [all] these deeds is made known to us how honoured is this [last created] animal” (*Homilies on Genesis* 8.5)

ANTHROPIC REPRESENTATIONS

- Wisdom
 - The universe is not a random association of things
 - The world's parameters are conditioned to nurture human existence
 - The human being is served by all things, but has responsibilities: caretaker and theologian



EPILOGUE

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- A range of views and attitudes
 - A sense of wonder at the order and beauty of the world
 - A comprehensive and contemplative approach to the world
 - Applied theory or ministering to the creation
- Wisdom for today
 - Description and interpretation
 - Contemplation and action