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HOW EVOLUTIONISTIC WERE THE CAPPADOCIAN FATHERS?¹

There is evidence from the Cappadocian School (fourth century) that would support the idea of evolution, understood in a way which will be introduced further here, especially, but not exclusively, through St. Basil the Great's first and fifth Homilies in his *Hexameron*, through Gregory of Nyssa's *Sermones de Creatione Hominis* [On the Making of Man], and through some of Gregory Nazianzus' *Orationes* and poetry. The School's representatives, have in general a coherent theory of creation perhaps clarified, at least partially, by the need to respond adequately to the Arian controversy. They speak about evolution in regard to both inanimate and living creation, reserving a special place within their account for humankind. They see this process as a means through which God operates within Creation. To underline that humankind was endowed by God with the dignity of creativity is not exclusive to the Cappadocians – and there is no certainly that it was even first proposed by them. A contemporary of the Cappadocian School, St. Athanasius (c. 295-373) spoke about the maximum dignity which human beings can reach in their creativity – to become co-creators of their own image (to the point of attaining deification).²

But the fathers from Cappadocia also showed that God had not exclusively endowed the human being with the capacity of being creative and continually evolving, but he has done that to both animate and inanimate creation [to the earth, specifically to the soil]. By being

¹I have used some of this material in a chapter which I published in a collective volume entitled *Din comorile teologiei Părinților Capadocieni* [From the treasures of the Cappadocian Fathers], Doxologia, Iași, 2010, pp. 233-241, but I consider this chapter a new work.

² St. Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation*, PG 25, 192B.

able to create, the latter produces new varieties, new kinds, and in general new forms increasingly adapted to life. It is this aspect of their works that the paper firstly attempts to flag up; it also tries to integrate that with the rest of the Cappadocians' teaching on creation.

In order to do this, it is appropriate to begin with St. Basil the Great's thoughts on the best known statement of the Bible: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Gen. 1.1). He underlines two important ideas here: the first one is that there is a Creator and that He established a beginning; therefore it cannot be assumed that the world has never had one. The second idea is that He created both the material and the spiritual worlds. Actually, St. Basil (330-379) commences his Homily 1 in the *Hexameron* by announcing: "I am about to speak of the creation of heaven and earth, **which was not spontaneous, as some have imagined, but drew its origin from God.**"³ And developing more on the opening statement in the Scripture, and also revisiting the topic in his Homily V entitled *The Germination of the Earth*, St. Basil expresses his understanding of creation as an ongoing process. He strongly emphasises other statements in Genesis (I, 11): "Let the earth bring forth grass!" and "Let the earth bring forth the living creature" (I, 24), i.e. not that "God created grass" and "God created living creatures", and by doing so St. Basil indicates that the earth, and matter in general, were endowed with the dignity of creativity; for him creation evolves and, more than that, can itself create. In his Homily V, which he dedicated precisely to the topic of germination as it allowed him to develop his evolutionist ideas, he continues: "The earth germinates. It does not, however, sprout that which it has, but transforms [...] as much as God gives to it the strength to act".⁴ The Earth is unable to be fertile by itself, but the Word of God intervenes with its active power to make it so. Therefore, for St. Basil, creation evolves. He describes and explains further the process of evolution and the continuity of the creative process: "It was deep wisdom that commanded the earth, when it rested after discharging the weight of the waters, first to bring forth grass, then wood as we still see it doing at this time. For the voice that was then heard and this command **were as a natural and permanent law for it; it gave fertility and the power to produce fruit**

³ St Basil the Great, Homily 1 ("On how God created the Heaven and the Earth"), *Hexameron* PG 29. 11; emphasis added.

⁴ St Basil the Great, Homily V (On how the Earth germinates), *Hexameron*, PG 29, 2B-C.

for all ages to come; the production of vegetables shows first germination. When the germs begin to sprout they form grass; **this develops and becomes a plant**, which insensibly receives its different articulations, and reaches its maturity in the seed. Thus all things which sprout and are green are developed. **Let the earth bring forth by itself without having any need of help from without**”,⁵ concludes St. Basil. The role of the earth is important in this process because it was provided with the necessary capability to do all this. Even more notable is the role of humankind as conceived by the Fathers of the Church, as I will show in the second half of the paper.

Before this, it is worth pointing out the surprising similarity between St. Basil’s view presented above and some of Charles Darwin’s ideas, for example those expressed in the final paragraph of *The Origins of Species* published in 1859:

There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed [by the Creator] into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone on cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from such so simple a beginning endless forms, most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.⁶

In his book, Darwin argued that all of the life which exists – mammal, bird, insect and vegetable – descends from a single or a few common ancestors through the *natural selection* process. Plants and animals in the wild produce offspring that differ slightly in their characteristics, and are thus slightly better or worse adapted to survive in their given environment. Those offspring that are better adapted are more likely to be able to breed and pass on their characteristics to their own offspring. Variations in offspring are random, but natural selection is non-random because it favours variations best fitted to their environment. Darwin argued that the vast length of time over which this process occurred would allow for the evolution of new species (a lineage of animals or plants only able to breed within itself), and not merely varieties within a species. This would occur if a species was divided into two populations within isolated environments, and these environments gradually diverged. Each population would adapt to the environment it found

⁵ St Basil the Great, Homily V (On how the Earth germinates), in *Hexameron*, PG 29, 40, 1; emphasis added. See also Philip Schaff, “8 Basil: Letters and Selected Works” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (2nd Series), T&T, Edinburgh, 1895.

⁶ Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, Penguin Classics, 1968, pp. 459-460.

itself in, and thus become different from the other one. These differences might become so substantial that the two populations could no longer interbreed, and so one species would have evolved into two.

When Darwin presented his theory he did not explain everything, for example, he did not say how the properties of parents were passed on to their offspring, or how the same parent could produce offspring with a variety of characteristics. These matters have been answered in various ways by later scientists –many of no Christian belief–, but other issues have been raised, such as the (necessary?) death and suffering of creatures as they evolve and whether evolution is guided or has a purpose. For Christian thinkers the answer to the latter questions is positive. In an early passage of his book, Darwin himself explicitly mentions the Creator in a way very reminiscent of the views of St. Basil. There he states that evolution “accords better with what we know of the laws impressed on matter by the Creator.”⁷ The theology-science debate continues today on those and other topics – many ‘Darwinian’, but it seems that there are sufficient communalities between the works of the Cappadocians and that of Darwin for a comparison to be worthwhile.

Going back to St. Basil for trying to infer his view on the process of natural selection (never termed as such by him), firstly we shall mention that he thought that God acts not only on the macroscopic scale – creating heavens and the Earth – but that He also takes care of the smallest creatures. What he believed from this perspective is consistent with the content of Psalm 104, which is the poetic rendering of Genesis 1.11 and an illustration of how God’s permanent creative action in nature can be expressed in human terms:

He sends the springs into the valleys;
They flow among the hills.
They give drink to every beast of the field;
The wild donkeys quench their thirst.
By them the birds of the heavens have their home;
They sing among the branches.⁸

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 458.

⁸ Psalm 104, verses 10-12, *The Orthodox Study Bible. New Testament and Psalms: Discovering Orthodox Christianity in the Pages of the New Testament*, (Fr. Peter. Gillquist, Project Director), New King James Version, p. 719.

Today in the Orthodox Churches this is the hymn which starts the Vespers every evening except during the Bright Week and that is also sung or read at the Pentecost.

According to the Scripture, after the creation of plants, animals (Figs. 1-2), and peoples (Fig. 2) “God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good”. (Gen. 1, 31). St. Basil understands that God worked on those within time – ‘in seasons’, making them the subject of development and growth.



Fig. 1. Creation of the Animal Kingdom, Painted in St. Isaac of Syria Skete, Boscobel, Wisconsin Icon from my personal collection.



Fig. 2. Fresco depicting Adam naming the animals, the creation of Eve, and other events from Genesis. The Filanthropinos monastery in Ioannina.

The primordial elements of creation contained within them the virtual species which appeared gradually, depending on the suitable conditions

of their particular existence. A modern scientist would have to agree that the laws of physics of our universe, present from the beginning of time, contain within them all of the potentialities that make biological evolution possible. For both the Cappadocian and a faithful modern scientist God, through His power, made possible for the species to contain the germs of the future ones and to make them occur naturally and coherently in accordance with the Divine will. St. Basil shows that, “In the same way that the potter, after having made with equal pains a great number of vessels, has not exhausted either his art or his talent [...], the Maker of the Universe, whose creative power, far from being bounded by one world, could extend to the infinite, needed only the impulse of His will to bring the immensities of the visible world into being.”⁹ The Earth is the place where the world exists as “a school of rational souls and where the knowledge of God can be learnt, but also a guide for the mind to contemplate the invisible.”¹⁰ Human freedom can be exercised there. These views are consistent with those in the Holy Scripture that conceive of the entire universe as a work of God. In passages where it describes the creation of single elements of the world, the Book invokes God’s will, while presenting these elements as being at the same time the product of natural causes brought about by natural conditions.

St. Basil saw Creation in a Trinitarian perspective, with the Holy Spirit pondering over the waters to ‘warm them up’ – to prepare them to welcome life. He combined the Biblical narrative with elements from Greek thought; from the latter he borrowed the idea that the natural elements (fire, earth, fire, and water)¹¹ are not inert in the creative process, but they manifest, by their own origin, an attraction towards the concrete forms intended by the Demiurge. Empedocles, for instance, considers that the various arrangements of the four eternally existing ‘roots’, as he calls them, are responsible for the genesis and for the

⁹ St Basil the Great, Homily I, *Hexaemeron*, PG 29, l. 8.

¹⁰ Idem, PG 29, l. 11D.

¹¹ Among the Greek philosophers who based their worldview on these elements are, among others: Empedocles (ca. 490–430 BC), Heraclitus (c. 535-c.475 BC), Thales (b. C. 620 BC), Anaxagoras (c. 500-428 BC), and Anaximander (610-c. 546 BC). In addition to the titles below, see also Daniel W. Graham (ed. and trans.), *The texts of early Greek philosophy: the complete fragments and selected testimonies of the major Presocratics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; New York, 2010 and Dirk L. Couprie, *Heaven and earth in ancient Greek cosmology: from Thales to Heraclites Ponticus*, Springer, New York and London, 2011.

changing characteristics of the visible world (he is not very consistent in naming the four – sometimes they are treated as gods because of their eternal and unchanging nature, as the Olympian gods themselves were). But perhaps what is even more important in Empedocles' case is his idea of 'Love and Strife' – also divine and eternally existing– as cosmic forces that act on the roots: Love brings them into unity and Strife separates them. Aristotle¹² thinks that in Empedocles' thought there is a suggestion "that Love is the cause of good and Strife of evil."¹³ To make the connection with the topic of this paper, it should be underlined that for the Greek philosopher both Love and Strife are necessary to account for the recurring generations; their alternating play of balance and movement passed to the 'roots' creates. His philosophy received a very pertinent critique from Aristotle in its inconsistencies; what is important to say in the context of our discussion is that his concept of Love is different in its limitation from that of the Cappadocians because it implies destruction in order to generate; in the Cappadocian understanding the divine love is fundamentally creative.

Anaxagoras (c. 500 BC-428 BC) is even a more interesting case because he brings into discussion the *Nous* as a cosmic mind ordering all things.¹⁴ In the philosopher's words: "The other things have a share in everything, but *Nous* is unlimited and self-ruling and has been mixed with no thing, but is alone itself by itself."¹⁵ It is not only a controlling force, but also a knowing and discerning one (so one can find here the connection with the idea of self-contemplation specific to the Cappadocian thought that will be dealt with later); even though it is not mixed, *Nous* is ever present in things and in the Cosmos in general. Anaxagoras explains how he sees the 'mechanism' of creation through it:

And *Nous* controlled the whole revolution, so that it started to revolve in the beginning. First, it began to revolve from a small

¹² Aristotle, *Metaph.* 1 985a4-10, and 988a 14-16.

¹³ M. R. Wright (ed.), *Empedocles. The extant fragments*, Bristol Classical Press, Bristol, p. 30. In his introduction to the fragments of Empedocles' thought, Wright has a very pertinent commentary.

¹⁴ Patricia Curd (ed.), *Anaxagoras of Clazomenae: Fragments and Testimonia: a text and translation with notes and essays*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, London, 2007 and David Sider (ed.), *The fragments of Anaxagoras*, Academia Verlag, Sankt Augustin, 2005.

¹⁵ Anaxagoras, B12, in Curd, *Anaxagoras of Clazomenae*, p. 23. Curd comments on fragment B12 in chapter 4 of the book.

region, but it is revolving yet more, and will revolve still more. And *Nous* knew (*egnō*) them all: the things that are mixed together, the things that are being separated off, and the things that are being dissociated. And whatever sorts of things were going to be, and whatever sorts will be, all these *Nous* set in order. And *Nous* also ordered this revolution, in which the things being separated off revolve, the stars and the sun and the moon and the air and the aether. This revolution caused them to separate off. The dense is being separated off from the rare, and the warm from the cold, and the brighter from the dark, and the dry from the moist. But there are many shares of many things; nothing is completely separated of or dissociated one from the other except *Nous*. All *Nous* is alike, both the greater and the smaller. Nothing else is like anything else, but each one is and was most manifestly those things of which there are the most in it.”¹⁶

It is obvious that that situation of the *Nous* among the first principle has a deterministic aspect and sets a limitation to its creative power.

In contrast, for St. Basil creation is free in its manifestation precisely because it makes concrete the infinite potentiality of its Author. It has the privilege to exist by the grace of God Himself, and not out of chance or necessity. The Orthodox Church has taken this point of view further by maintaining that creation is an ongoing process in the present. Things are being created all the time, and the novelty occurs by divine action. Metrop. Kallistos Ware, in his *The Beginning of the Day* underlines, along the lines of St. Maximus the Confessor, that creation is a continual process: “The world exists because God loves it, not because He loved it a long time ago, at the beginning, but because He loves it here and now, at this moment as at every moment. We are to speak not in an aoristic but in a present tense.”¹⁷

The world functions under the auspices of trust: on the one hand of the Father in His Son and in His creation and, on the other hand, of the creation itself – especially of human beings – in its/their freedom. Human beings have a special status within creation in the Cappadocian’s understanding. At every apparition of a new order of existence, God says

¹⁶ Anaxagoras, B13, in Curd, *Anaxagoras of Clazomenae*, pp. 23-25.

¹⁷ Metrop. Kallistos Ware, trans. Niki Tsironis, *The Beginning of the Day. The Orthodox Vision of Creation*, Shrine of Neomartyr George of Ioannina, 2007, p. 47.

‘Let it be’ reaffirming thus his will for the new occurrence, and giving a special power to it. Without God’s will and power a new order, which has similarities with all the others, will not come into existence. A new act of God places within the anterior orders something which develops in the new ones. But, in a sense, all the posterior orders of existence have been foreseen in the initial creation and, in a more particular way, in those immediately anterior to them. In other words, the initial creation had within it also the capacity to receive the power of producing a new order. Therefore, everything that comes out of God’s will also do so by way of the anterior orders. Or, to put it differently, all orders of being were created by Him with a special communality and connection among them. This is why one can say that, on one hand, all of them were created from the ‘beginning’, and on the other hand, that the Creation has ended with the occurrence of human beings in the sense that the humans are the last to appear on the scene; however they undergo a continual change, as the world around them does - this at least is the Cappadocians’ understanding. For them, Creation is not complete before God reveals its meaning in people. Human beings are created at the end because they needed all the anterior orders in order to exist and the previous orders cannot find their meaning anywhere other than within people. For at least some of Darwin’s followers today, human evolution by natural selection has been superseded in part by conscious cultural evolution. To this extent their ideas are in line with those of the Cappadocian School. Others, however, would argue that natural selection still operates to a significant extent in humans.

In spite of the implications of his thought for humans, one cannot say that St. Basil focuses in his sermons and writings on the place of people among the other elements of creation, even though he refers to them from time to time. He did not include comments on the origin of man in those works. His younger brother, Gregory of Nyssa (c. 332-389/after 394), would supplement St. Basil in this respect in his *Apologia in Hexameron*, but especially in *Sermones de Creatione Hominis* [On the Making of Man].¹⁸

But before moving on to St. Gregory, one interesting idea in St. Basil’s Homily I is worth highlighting and can serve as a conclusion on his thought: only people with special qualities and a pure life – true ascetics, it seems – can really understand how the world was created. He

¹⁸ St. Gregory of Nyssa, “Sermones de Creatione hominis”, in Hadwiga Hörner (ed.), *Opera supplementum*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1972.

says: “What ear is worthy to hear such a tale? How earnestly the soul should prepare itself to receive such high lessons! How pure it should be from carnal affections, how unclouded by worldly disquietudes, how active and ardent in its researches, how eager to find in its surroundings an idea of God which may be worthy of Him!”¹⁹

St. Gregory of Nyssa, (?-d. after 385 or 386), was also of the opinion that everything that is visible in creation was chronologically preceded by the Divine World, and that God commanded all things to appear in an orderly fashion. He believed, as did his brother, Basil, that the world was created by God out of love in a single act, in the form of seminal principles²⁰ which developed into the reality we know by means of the power God provided them with.²¹

St. Gregory believed that not even the position of heavenly bodies was fortuitous, but rather that they were set in an order prescribed by Divine wisdom before the Creation. He thought that their place in the sky is permanent and that they are immobile.²² That can be viewed, for instance, in opposition to the belief of a representative of Greek philosophy – Plotinus (204/5-270) – who conceived them as moving accordingly to their own souls.²³

St. Gregory also describes humankind’s existence by the evolutionistic notion of *epektasis* (a constant progress). His interpretation was Platonic; it had the story of the fall and return of the human soul as central to it. In opposition to Plato and his followers, who supported the idea that stability is perfection and described change in negative terms, the Cappadocian Father affirms that human progress is a constant increase in virtue and godliness. In Gregory’s theology, only God himself has always been perfect, has never changed, and never will. God is, in his terminology, a ‘beneficent Nature’²⁴, a ‘Goodness without

¹⁹ St. Basil the Great, Homily I, *Hexameron*, PG 29. l. 11.

²⁰ St. Gregory of Nyssa, *Hexameron liber* [Apologia in Hexameron], PG 44. 72B, 77D.

²¹ Idem, PG 44. 72B-C, 113B, 121D.

²² Idem, PG 44. 117A.

²³ Plotinus (204/5-270), *Enn II and Against the Gnostics*. See Jean-Marc Narbonne (ed.), *Plotinus in dialogue with the Gnostics*, Brill, Leiden and Boston, Ancient Mediterranean and medieval texts and contexts Series, Studies in Platonism, Neoplatonism, and the Platonic tradition, v. 11, 2011, and Luc Brisson et J.-F. Pradeau Plotin et al. (eds., trans.), *Traité 51-54. Sur la vie de Plotin et la mise en ordre de ses livres par Porphyre*, Flammarion, Paris, 2010.

²⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *De Anima et Resurrectione* [On the Soul and the Resurrection], PG 46. 103B.

measure²⁵, a “worthy object of love for all beings endowed with reason, the beauty the most to be desired, **the origin of all that exists, the source of life, intellectual light, and wisdom.**”²⁶ Human beings fell from grace in the Garden of Eden, but rather than returning to an unchanging state, humanity’s goal is to become increasingly perfect, more like God, even though a human being will never understand, much less attain, God’s transcendence. However, they will be saved, says St. Gregory of Nyssa in his *On the Soul and the Resurrection* in which he advocates his doctrine of *Apocatastasis*, (restoration).²⁷ In Ware’s reading, for St. Gregory of Nyssa the world’s inhabitants have the consciousness of the beginning and of their Maker. Human beings can be raised up only by the awareness that they are made in the image and likeness of God, i.e. they are spiritual beings, exalted over the natural and social world and summoned to transfigure it and to be Stewards of it.²⁸

Gregory also claimed that human beings undergo a continual process of creation in the sense that each person, as well as humankind as a whole, is being shaped and led towards what God wanted them to be from the moment He conceived them. The history of this continual becoming of the people is the history of salvation. From this perspective, the first two chapters in Genesis do not describe how the world was created, but God’s plan, developed through Christ, to create a human being having Him incarnated as a prototype. This description was made in metaphoric and poetic terms suitable for communicating a mystery. But the gift of creativity was also bestowed on human beings themselves and on this Gregory of Nyssa wrote his *Sermones de Creatione Hominis*.²⁹

A paradox is present in the relationship between God and its creation, which can be captured in the question: How can He, as an indivisible Unity, manifest Himself in the multiplicity of created things? Philip Sherrard’s opinion on this matter is that, “not only can nothing be outside God, but also everything must be directly related to, and reflect an aspect of, His divinity. This in turn means... that God’s ultimate nature, or His Essence, cannot finally be identified with anything; it is beyond everything, totally transcendent of all manifestation and

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ St. Gregory of Nyssa, Idem, PG 46. 103B; emphasis added.

²⁷ Ibid., PG 46. 104.

²⁸ Ware, *The Beginning of the Day*.

²⁹ Gregorius Nyssenus, “Sermones de Creatione Hominis” [On the creation of Man], in Hadwiga Hörner (ed.), *Opera supplementum*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1972.

relationship, unqualified and undetermined.”³⁰ But a communication with God is nevertheless possible in His capacity of being a Person; therefore a continual dialogue person to Person takes place.

The existence of the world has a purpose, but one that is revealed gradually to humankind. If God revealed Himself and His ways at once, the world of created things would have lacked its purpose. As shown above, for the Cappadocian Fathers the main purpose of the human beings is to exercise their spiritual powers on the ascending path to God.”³¹

St. Gregory of Nyssa’s view strongly influenced not only those of St. Maximus the Confessor (c. 580-662) for example— who shared in the idea of *theosis* or ‘divinization of people’ as being the highest point of evolution. But his sermons also influenced medieval and later thinking in general. For example, in the fifteenth century (1463-1494), Pico della Mirandola’s outlook on the creative vocation of man echoes ideas from St. Gregory’s *Sermones de Creatione Hominis*. He imagines the dialogue between God and Adam, with the Creator saying: “I have placed thee at the center of the world, that from there thou mayest more conveniently look around and see whatsoever is in the world. Neither heavenly, nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have We made thee. Thou, like a judge appointed for being honourable, art the molder and maker of thyself: thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou doest prefer. Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures which are brutes. Thou canst again grow upward from thy soul’s reason into the higher natures which are divine.”³²

St. Basil and Gregory of Nyssa’s friend, St Gregory of Naziansus (328-389 or 330-389/390), also believed that the Earth has creative powers; he stresses, however, that it would have been unable to become fertile by itself, without the intervention of the Word of God, which made it able to create in its turn. Thus the role of the earth is still significant, as he states in his *Five Theological Orations*.³³ His cosmology is expressed especially in his *Oration on the Theophany*

³⁰ Philip Sherrard, *The Greek East and the Latin West: A Study in the Christian Tradition*, Denise Harvey Publisher, Limni-Evia, 1995, p. 35.

³¹ Ware, *The Beginning of the Day*, p. 209.

³² Pico della Mirandola, *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, trans. Ch. G. Wallis, Introd. Paul J. W. Miller, Hackett, Indianapolis, Cambridge, 1998, p. 5. He wrote it in 1486; the book was called the "Manifesto of the Renaissance".

³³ St. Gregory of Naziansus, *Five Theological Orations*, ed. Arthur James Mason, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1899.

(Christmas) where God is presented as self-contemplative (though in three persons, they are not treated as constituting any diversity in the Godhead in the sense they are not presented as acting successively towards creation) until his Love manifested as Goodness ‘overflows’ and brings into being Creation.³⁴ One can identify here the same Greek thread coming from Platon and Aristotle and ending in Christianity via Plotin. God’s life before the first creative act consisted in the contemplation of his own nature, but Love changed it all. Ruether thinks that “like Plotinus, Gregory Nazianzus attributes the first creation to ‘an overflow of Goodness’”³⁵ Plato also uses the same expression in *Timaeus*; for him such an ‘overflow’ is a necessity of God’s nature. Gregory has his own explanation for it and for what the Divinity creates: “...since this movement of self-contemplation alone could not satisfy Goodness, but God must be poured out and go forth beyond Himself to multiply the objects of its beneficence, for this was essential to the highest Godness, He first conceived the Heavenly and the Angelic Powers”.³⁶ This is the invisible creation (or the ‘intellectual’³⁷ one), which comes into being before the visible creation, including that of humankind. Ruether later detects a contradiction in Gregory’s thought on the creative love, because in *Or.* 29.2 he contends: “For we shall not venture to speak of an ‘overflow of Goodness’, as one of the Greek philosophers dared to say, as if it were a bowl overflowing, and this in plain words in his discourse on the first and second causes”.³⁸ She finds a way out of this situation by drawing attention to the fact that it is difficult to distinguish between a necessity of God’s nature and spontaneous love, if love and beneficence are God’s nature, and I think she is right.

Even in his poems, St. Gregory of Naziansus conceives God as encompassing everything in a kind of protective love abounding from his mind:

But if God’s the mixer, accept him likewise as creator of all.
A potter, too, puts form to his clay when he turns the wheel,
a goldsmith gives it to gold, and a sculptor to stones.

³⁴ St. Gregory of Naziansus, *Or.* 38.8, PG 36. 320B and *Or.* 40.5, PG 364B.

³⁵ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gregory of Nazianzus. Rhetor and Philosopher*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1969, p. 131.

³⁶ St. Gregory of Naziansus, *Or.* 38.9, in PG 36. 320C; Ruether’s transl.

³⁷ Ruether, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, pp. 131, 134.

³⁸ St. Gregory of Naziansus, *Or.* 29. 2, in PG 36. 76C.

Credit God with more than you do our mind,
 O lover of no origins.
 Matter is what is more, with the forms that move.
 He thought, and things come to be in-formed: the divine thought
 is the complicated womb of all that is.³⁹

For Gregory, humankind was created after the other part of the material world (as opposed to the Origenist view in which the human soul was pre-existent as a part of the spiritual creation). He describes the human being in double terms: it is a ‘new angel’ which paradoxically partakes of both creations: earthly and heavenly, visible and invisible, lowliness and greatness, flesh and spirit. For Gregory the fall was anticipated in creation.

St. Gregory Naziansus subscribed to the ‘restoration’ doctrine with his friend from Nyssa, but he did not do it openly; it is implied in his work in a “cautious, undogmatic” way, to quote Hanson’s qualification of Naziansus’ attitude⁴⁰. He believed that God will bring all of creation into harmony with the Kingdom of Heaven.⁴¹

I hope I will come back to this Cappadocian father on another occasion, but for now we draw the conclusion that for these early thinkers creation was an evolutionary process. It was initiated by God from within his own Being, out of love, and in total freedom. As shown above, he did not need to create the world, but He chose to do so. A much later Orthodox theologian, George Florovsky (1893-1979) writes along the same lines confirming what the Cappadocians believed. He states: “The world exists. But it *began* to exist. And that means: the world could have not existed. There is no necessity whatsoever for the existence of the world”.⁴² The only reason for its having come into being is the divine love: “The sole foundation of the world consists in God’s

³⁹ Peter Gilbert (trans. and Introd.), *On God and Man. The Theological Poetry of St. Gregory of Nazianus*, pp. 48-49; Poem 1.1.4 *De mundo*; Gilbert’s trans., PG 37. 414-423.

⁴⁰ J. W. Hanson, *Universalism: The Prevailing Doctrine of the Christian Church During Its First Five Hundred Years*, Universalist Publishing House, Boston and Chicago, 1899, Chapter XV: Gregory Nazianzen. See also “Basilians” in *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Aachen, vol. 1, p. 210.

⁴¹ Christos Simelidis, *Selected Poems of Gregory of Naziansus. 1.2.17; II 1.10, 19, 32: A Critical Edition with Introduction and Commentary*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Hypomnemata, Band 177, 2009, p. 74.

⁴² George Florovsky, *Creation and Redemption*, Collected Works, vol. 3, Norland, Belmont, MA, p. 45.; his emphasis.

freedom, in the freedom of Love.”⁴³ Because of this, God has not left his creation; he has not just created the universe and then withdrew from it, but is still indwelling it. He is omnipresent within his own work.

The Cappadocian Fathers saw creation as the way through which God speaks to humanity, and through which He lifts it to the level of co-partner. Since humankind was meant to increase spiritually – i.e. to evolve – evolution is a way or a method used by God to create it and everything it needs.

If it is true that in the Hebrew of the Old Testament the word ‘barach’, which was translated as ‘creation’, means actually ‘to set into motion’, everything becomes even more consistent. Certainly, the Holy Fathers knew what they were saying.

In any case, there is room for their meeting with the ‘classical’ evolutionists.

⁴³ Ibid., 71.

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HOW EVOLUTIONISTIC WERE THE CAPPADOCIAN FATHERS?

- s u m m a r y -

In the multitude of theories about the relationship between evolution and creation within the Christian context, those which assert that the two are compatible have fewer supporters.

This is somewhat unexpected given the fact that the primary sources of both movements – that which affirms that the world was created by God and that which maintains that it is the result of evolution – do not necessarily allege an incompatibility between these two views. Genesis (I, 11) says: “Let the earth bring forth grass!” (but not ‘God created grass’). It means that the earth, and matter in general, was endowed with creativity, and that can imply evolution.

Along the same lines, one of the representatives of the Cappadocian School, St. Basil the Great, states that: “The earth germinates. It does not, however, sprout that which it has, but transforms [...] as much as God gives to it the strength to act” (Earth is unable to be fertile by itself, but the Word of God intervenes with its active power to make it so; yet the role of the earth is important in this process. Even more so is that of humankind.

On the other hand, Charles Darwin himself writes at the end of his *The Origins of Species*:

There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed [by the Creator] into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone on cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from such so simple a beginning endless forms, most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.

My paper is an invitation for scholars to revisit these primary sources whenever a debate on the above topic takes place.