

# POSTULATING ON THE FOUNTAINS OF SOME EARLY CHRISTIAN COSMOLOGICAL NOTIONS\*\*

BY  
A. P. KOUMANTOS

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The purpose of this brief article is to give a critical and concise account of some cosmological ideas which influenced the formation of the early Christian doctrine of cosmology. It is therefore necessary for one to examine both the cosmological conceptions of the Greek and of the Christian worlds.

## *a) The Greek World.*

There is a common preoccupation among the various ancient philosophical trends concerning the cosmological norm which, through Aristotle and also the astronomers, has largely influenced the Christian cosmological conceptions. According to this common norm the earth was understood as the sphere at the core of a system of moving spheres which had the same centre. The universe was divided into three main zones. The first zone covered the space between the earth and the moon, and it was understood to consist of a dark and thick atmosphere. This is the lowest and the least worthy part of creation, and its characteristics are that of constant change, of corruption, of death and of general fluctuation. The parallel spheres of the sun and of the five planets belonged to the second zone which was conceived to be extended above the moon. Beyond all this was the last sphere, belonging to the third zone, and consisting of inflamed ether, which is the purest physical element. It was believed that this sphere, through its daily description of a circle around the earth, moved together with the fixed stars itself. This perfect movement of the universe was understood as a reflection and as an expression of the divine order and harmony, which resulted in the idea

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that the universe, because of its self-autonomous movement, is a living organism, or that it is filled with a living spirit<sup>1</sup>.

It was the assumption that the *OUSIA* (essence) of the created world is an all-embracing rational entity, a rationally understandable definition or determination of the unity of Being (*EINAI*),<sup>2</sup> that resulted in the forementioned cosmological ideas and which subsequently formed a threefold interpretation of the cosmic reality. The first interpretation regards cosmic reality as self-sufficient; it affirms a kind of eternity, self-existence and autonomy of the universe; this is expressed most characteristically by Heracleitos.<sup>3</sup> The second analogical interpretation does not put the cause of the cosmic harmony outside the world either, but it deifies the elements of the cosmic reality as such. One faces here a primitive human attitude towards the universe, which gives the elements of the world a divine character, which contrasts with the human situation of mortality and corruption, and which, according to Plato, is common to both Greeks and non-Greeks.<sup>4</sup> The third interpretation is derived from the first cause of the world, which, according to Aristotle, is to be found in the existence of an undefined God-Creator, who is the source of all movement and other.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the cosmic reality is interpreted on its own, in its entity and in its coincidence with the rational understanding of the unified synthesis of the cosmic entirety, without taking into account the question concerning the ontological differentiation between the cosmic reality and Being (*EINAI*),

1. Aristotle, *De Cellum*, 2,13, 295b, 11-16. From these common conceptualities of the ancient philosophical schools Epicurianism must be exempted. For more details cf. Dreyer, J. L. E.: *A History of Astronomy from Thales to Kepler*, Cambridge 1935; and Dodds E. R.: *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, Cambridge 1965, p. 5ff.

2. Cf. Heidegger, M.: *Was ist Metaphysik?*, Frankfurt 1965<sup>9</sup>, pp. 11,19.

3. «Neither any of all Gods, nor any out of all men, has created this world, but it always was, as it is and will be an everlasting self-living fire», Fr. 30, Diels I, 84, 1ff. The translation of the various Greek passages is mine, and therefore I am entirely responsible for any mistakes.

4. «At the beginning there were the earth and the sun and stars and the universes and all the parts of the hours in this way well ordered and (self-) arranged, by being divided into years and months; and because of this both Greeks and non-Greeks are of the opinion that they are divine powers (lit. Gods)», Laws X, 886a.

5. «After they had observed the sun being around during the day, and during the night the well-ordered movement of all the other stars, they thought that there is a God who causes this movement and this good order» (*Fragmenta Selecta, On Philosophy* 12a, edited by W. D. Ross, Oxford 1964, p. 80.

that is to say the question concerning the mode or the way according to which this cosmic reality *is*.<sup>6</sup>

This hierarchical structure of the universe, whose various parts are united by and through the link of *SYM-PATHEIA* (co-suffering),<sup>7</sup> gave the philosophers concerned with Ethics, and especially the Stoics, the natural and necessary ground to speak of the vanity of all human desires, since man's earthly environment is nothing but one single 'moment' within the whole of the universe, which 'moment' in all actuality holds the lowest possible position in it.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, within the cosmological systems under consideration a tendency can be distinguished pointing to the relegation of the values of human history to a level inferior to the one they really possess, and this tendency has influenced a number of Christian thinkers.<sup>9</sup> These cosmological conceptions, which tend to lower human dignity, led some thinkers to formulate opinions of a great interest to safeguard man from despairing. Thus, it was not the visible world which constantly changes, that should have been understood as forming the reality, but whatever existed beyond and underneath this visible world which was understood to be stable (*ESTO-TA*) and unlimited by space and time. This necessarily implies that there must be a strict separation between the stable reality hidden behind the phenomenon and the phenomenon itself as it appears in the visible world. Hence, true man and his nature can be found in man's intellect and his soul, while earthly life is the 'theatre', where those alive are the 'actors'. Consequently, only escape from the present situation and the discovery and exploitation of the timeless being (*ON*) can form

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6. Cf. Giannaras, C.: *The Person and the Eros*, Athens 1974, pp. 215-222.

7. The first meaning of this term is that of 'co-suffering'. Hence, it means 'affinity or concord'. Cf. Liddell, H. G. and Scott, R.: *A Greek - English Lexicon*, Oxford 1953<sup>o</sup>, p. 1680, c.a, where an extensive reference to various philosophical connotations of this term can be found.

8. It is interesting to draw a parallel here between this and Kierkegaard's ideas of 'moment' and 'contemporaneity', expressed mainly in his work: *Der Augenblick*. It was perhaps his study on Plato and Xenophon, (which resulted in his doctorate thesis under the title, 'The Concept Of Irony with constant Reference to Socrates', presented to the Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Copenhagen and accepted on July the 16th., 1841), that influenced him and orientated his thought towards the forementioned ideas. For further details cf. Nissiotis, N. A.: *Existentialism and the Christian Faith*, Athens 1956.

9. On this point cf. my MTh. diss., *The Concept of time from the 2nd. to the 4th. centuries according to the Greek Fathers*. 1974, pp. 21-26.

man's objective and final goal, which was predetermined long ago.<sup>10</sup>

It is now evident that the circular concept of time, which was the dominant one amongst ancient Greeks, in reality served to strengthen man's sense of dignity, which was severely suppressed through the feeling that time in this movement changes whatever exists radically and unavoidably.<sup>11</sup> This circular conception of time forms the solid foundation of all Greek-pagan cosmologies, simply because man can only find a consolation for the bitter knowledge that his existence is no more than transitory, through the belief in continual new starting-points.<sup>12</sup> It is the natural outcome of this cyclical concept of time that the universe was understood to be eternal and therefore divine, since it was conceived *to be* before the beginning of time and consequently immortal.<sup>13</sup> Whatever exists and owes its existence to a cause or a principle (*LOGOS*), was, is, and will still be perfect, whole and autonomous. It follows that nothing really new can possibly take place in the course of history.<sup>14</sup> Accordingly, the true reality, and the true perfection, and the true perennity lie not in the future, but in the past, in the beginning and the first causes, and this is why no radical or essential change can ever take place in history.<sup>15</sup> The necessity of the beings, that is to say the cause

10. Plato, *Laws* 644 DE, 803 C- 804 B. Plotin, *Enneads* 4, 3, 17 and 27. Cf. Daniélou, J.: *Platonisme and Théologie; Essai sur la doctrine de S. Grégoire de Nysse*, Paris 1944, p. 182.

11. This is founded on Aristotle's opinion, *Phys.* D14, 222b 30,31, that: «Every change takes place in time». Cf. Giannaras, C.: *The Ontological Content of the Theological Concept: Person*, Athens 1970, pp. 45-56.

12. Cf. Bidez, J.: *Eos ou Platon et l' Orient*. Bruxelles 1945: and the brilliant study of Eliade, M.: *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, London 1955.

13. On this point cf. Florovsky, G.: *Subjects on Orthodox Theology*, (Greek Tran.) Athens 1973, pp. 9-18 and 91-96; *ibid.*, *The Idea of Creation in Christian Philosophy* in 'The Eastern Churches Quarterly', VIII, 3, 1949.

14. Cf. Callahan, J. F.: *Four Views of Time in Ancient Philosophy*, Baltimore 1948; and Widgery, A. G.: *Interpretations of History*, London 1961.

15. This can be seen in the way in which Hesiod places the 'golden age' at the beginning of all cosmic history. This golden period is followed by other periods of lesser importance, such as that of 'silver', that of 'bronce' and that of 'iron'. In *Deeds and Days*, 109-201. For more details cf. Baldry, H.: *Who Invented the Golden Age?*, in 'Classical Quarterly', N. S. 2, Oxford 1952, p. 83f. It is perhaps necessary to note here this cyclical understanding of space and time is closely connected with fatalistic beliefs derived from the concept of destiny. For the patristic approach to such ideas cf. Basil the Great, *In Hexaemeron*, M.P.G. 29, 132Bf., as well as Duhem, P.: *Le Système du Monde: Histoire de Doctrines Cosmologiques de Platon à Copernic*, Paris 1945, vol 2, pp. 408-416. This circular concep-

or principle of their existence, was conceived to be eternal. True reality, which lies in the past, and true perfection, which takes the shape of a circle, both resulted in true perennity, and this equals timelessness. This explains why ancient philosophy particularly dealt with the concept of the first causes; as well as the absence of the eschatological dimension due to its refusal to accept the concept of the linear process of time. None-the-less, one can discover amongst the various theories of ancient cosmologies a certain attempt to avoid this cyclical deadlock, especially in Plato's idea of the 'perfect cosmic year'.<sup>16</sup>

b) *The In-Between Period.*

It is now evident that the concept of God's creation of the world was entirely alien to pagan thought in general and to Greek thought in particular. A necessary presupposition of ancient Greek philosophy was the idea that nothing can derive its origin '*ex nihilo*'. Plotinus was the first Greek philosopher who, being under a certain Christian influence, put forward the idea of a transcendental being who gives all other beings not only their shape, but also their existence, their substance and their essence.<sup>17</sup>

The Book of Genesis is thought to be the source of all Christian cosmology, and its foundation is the doctrine according to which God freely created the universe '*ex nihilo*'.<sup>18</sup> It naturally follows from this that, from the very beginning, there must have been a gap between the ancient Greek and Christian cosmologies, which can not possibly be bridged. However, a number of Christian thinkers and ecclesiastical writers adopted certain Greek cosmological ideas and conceptions, which were to influence the theological formulation of the doctrine of

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tion, however, was not entirely opposite to the belief that a certain kind of progress can occur in one part of the circle or another. Cf. Aristotle, *Meteor.*, 339b 29, and *Problems*, 916a, 18f.; Guthrie, W. K. C.: *In the Beginning*, London 1957, ch. 4,5; Armstrong, A. H. and Markus, R. A.: *Christian faith and Greek Philosophy*, London 1964, ch. 9.

16. Plato, *Timaeus*, 39D; *Laws* 667A; *Politicus* 269. Similar ideas can be found in Aristotle, cf. Jaeger, W.: *Aristotle*, p. 130f. For more details cf. Lader, G.: *The Idea of Reform*, Cambridge Mass. 1959. p. 10f.

17. Cf. Thunberg, L.: *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, Lund 1965, pp. 51-53; Tsamis, D. G.: *The Eighth day*, Thessalonica 1973, pp. 12-17.

18. This doctrine has been formulated explicitly for the first time in 2 Macc. 7:28.

Creation. Thus, certain of Plato's teachings were adopted according to which a divine power rules everything in the best possible way, and the thinker or the believer through his mind can observe the wisdom and the rationality of this divine power.<sup>19</sup> Through the Stoics' adaptation of Plato's cosmology certain Christian theologians inherited the idea of divine providence.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, concepts like that of the 'first cause' or 'first principle', that of the 'natural knowledge of God', that concerning means and ways through which the existence of a wise and benevolent God can be proved, and so on, were gladly accepted by some Christian authors, and were also incorporated, developed and expounded in their systems.<sup>21</sup>

One might argue here that similar ideas occur in the Old Testament, and especially in the Psalter and the Wisdom Literature.<sup>22</sup> But this similarity is rather superficial, since there are radical differences between the Greek and the Jewish ways of thinking. Thus, the Greek philosophers and thinkers were led to grasp the existence of a deity by and through the order, the teleology and the harmony of the universe, which could easily be observed. The authors of the Old Testament, by contrast, while by taking into account what is usually called 'natural revelation', saw the greatness of God manifested especially through those unique, paradoxical and super-rational events of history, by means of which God intervened in worldly affairs and by so doing He disrupted the order, the teleology and the harmony of the universe as a whole.<sup>23</sup> Now, it is particularly because of this that one can justifiably argue that, whenever Christian writers speak of 'God's natural revelation', they are directly or indirectly influenced by the clearly formulated relevant Greek philosophical schemes. However, this influence does not

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19. Plato, *Laws* 644DE, and 803C-804B. Plotin, *Enneads* 4, 3, 17 and 27. Cf. Daniélou, J.: *Platonisme et Théologie Mystique: Essai sur la doctrine de Saint Grégoire de Nysse*, Paris 1944; p. 182; and Burghardt, W. J.: *The Image of God in Man according to Cyril of Alexandria*, Woodstock, Maryland 1957, esp. ch. 3, pp. 25-39.

20. Cf. Ladner, G. B.: *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers*, Cambridge, Mass. 1959.

21. Cf. Armstrong, A. H. and Markus, R. A.: *Christian Faith and Greek Philosophy*, London 1964, ch. 1, esp. p. 6f., and ch. 3, 4. And Hesen, J.: *Griechische oder biblische Theologie?*, München-Basel 1962.

22. Florovsky, G.: *The Idea of Creation in Christian Philosophy*, ECQ, VIII, 3, 1949.

23. As in fn. 21.

necessarily contradict the Biblical understanding of Creation, at least not in every single case, as it is to be seen in the following section.<sup>24</sup>

c) *The Christian World.*

Origen was the first amongst all Christian thinkers and writers who, through his attempt to systematise the Christian teachings, clearly indicated that the doctrine concerning the creation of the world forms the absolute prerequisite of all Christian eschatology and therefore of the doctrine of salvation.<sup>25</sup> Origen was in a way obliged to understand the created world as being eternal in order to provide a solid foundation for the doctrine of God's absolute perfection and in order to eliminate every possibility of fusion, confusion or alteration within the divinity. The Aristotelian rational adaptation of Biblical cosmology led Origen to adopt concepts such as that of the circular movement of the universe, and that of successive falls and risings of the spirits, due to their satiety (*KOROS*) derived from the knowledge of God.<sup>26</sup> Hence, because man's reconciliation with God was conceived as a return to man's original state and status, man's history could not possibly have any real significance and therefore it gained only a symbolical one, since everything which occurs in the course of history will be abandoned at the eschaton as a vain addition to that which is simple and real, that is to say, to the perfect circle. Historical events, because they have a temporary character, can not possibly possess an everlasting significance; they can only be understood as symbols of whatever exists beyond the present world.<sup>27</sup>

24. As in fn. 21.

25. Florovsky, G.: *Eschatology in the Patristic Age: An Introduction*, SP II, Berlin 1957, pp. 235-250.

26. It is noteworthy that Origen made a sincere attempt to found his teachings concerning the eternal cyclical movement of the universe and the eschatological reconciliation of everything upon a solid biblical basis. Thus, he interpreted Rev. 22:13: 'I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last', as signifying that the 'end' always coincides with the 'beginning': «*Semper enim similis est finis initiiis*», De Princ., 1, 6, 2 and 2, 1, 1. Cf. his interpretation of Jo. 13-16, in Contra Celsum 8, 72. None the less, one must note for the sake of truthfulness and clarity that, although Origen did not manage to free himself from the forementioned ideas, he did, however, deny emphatically the Stoic teaching concerning immanent repetition of the same events throughout the whole course of History, De Princ., 2, 3, 1 f. Cf. Gilson, E.: *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, New York 1955, p. 40f.

27. These theories inevitably caused some insurmountable difficulties with

All these weak points of Origen's system provided the impetus for the appearance of a fuller and more systematic and concise synthesis of Christian cosmological doctrine which had now to abandon and abolish every philosophical influence upon the essence of Creation which from now onwards is conceived to be the realm of the realisation of God's will, and therefore the realm of divine revelation and in some cases a divine revelation in itself. This was only possible after the end of the Church's struggles with Gnosticism and Arianism. Athanasius of Alexandria and the Cappadocians were those who systematically formulated once and for all the Christian doctrines of creation, of space and of time.<sup>28</sup> It is therefore of great interest that one must pay a considerable amount of attention to both Gnosticism and Arianism before drawing the final conclusion.

Both Gnostics and Manichees ascribed Creation to an inferior or evil creator who is in constant and increasing war with the forces of Goodness.<sup>29</sup> Thus they adopted a kind of very elaborate angelology,<sup>30</sup> and a whole system of spherical levels, which necessarily exists outside the divine Pleroma.<sup>31</sup> This unavoidably resulted in the idea that the world is the sphere of evil and therefore in constant opposition to God.<sup>32</sup> Ideas like the forementioned ones naturally led the Gnostics to consider space and subsequently time and history as the evil realm of all wickedness, if not the source of it as such. Thus they were inclined to

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regard to Christological doctrine, because due to these theories one might easily assume that the Christ-event was a mere historical incident and not a divine act in history necessarily resulting in eternal salvation. Furthermore, if the idea of reconciliation is conceived — as indeed it was — as a return to an originally absolute spiritual existence, then Christ's humanity can only be understood as a mere historical incident which has nothing to do with the plan of Creation. Cf. Origen, *De Princ.*, 2, 3, 4 and 3, 5, 3; Florovsky, G.: *Eschatology in the Patristic Age: An Introduction*, SP II, Berlin 1957, p. 243f.

28. On their point of view cf. my MTh. thesis, *Time-Concepts of the Early Greek Fathers*, to be published by Kleronomia, where an extensive bibliography can be found.

29. M.P.G. 10, 1448A; M.P.G. 8, 1301A. Cf. the excellent work of Bengsch, A.: *Heilsgeschichte und Heilswissen. Eine Untersuchung zur Struktur und Entfaltung des theologischen Denkens im Werk 'Adversus haereses' des Hl. Irenäus von Lyon*, 1957, esp. p. 55ff.

30. M.P.G. 10, 1441B; 1445A; 1437C; 1448A.

31. M.P.G. 9, 680A; M.P.G. 14, 268B-C; 416C; 137A; 421C; 465B.

32. M.P.G. 14, 565C; M.P.G. 28, 273B; M.P.G. 104, 348C; M.P.G. 91, 445C-448C. This idea has influenced in one way or another certain aspects of Orthodox Monasticism, but this topic cannot be discussed here.

reject history for the sake of an illusory timeless eternity, which was obviously the product of their philosophical-theological halucinations, which were derived from their syncretic and all-unifying attitude.<sup>33</sup> A certain kind of the most radical *de-historisation* was needed to save their face. This *de-historisation* took no longer seriously the Bible and eliminated the whole of redemptive history, thus becoming a victim to Docetism.<sup>34</sup> One can easily trace the roots of this attitude and understanding back to Greek cosmological beliefs in the essence of the created world as an all-embracing rational entity in the self-sufficiency of the cosmic reality and in the divine character of the elements forming the world.

Now, Arianism can be understood partly as a result of the fore-mentioned Gnostic ideas and partly as the natural outcome of Christological subordinationism held by Origen and some of the early Christian Apologetes and especially by Justin the Martyr.<sup>35</sup> The well-known Arian slogan: 'There was a period of time during which He (Christ) was not' (*HN POTE OTE OYK HN*), quite apart from its fundamental and long-debated Christological significance and implications, bears also a remarkable amount of cosmological implications, which taken seriously unavoidably lead to the same results as Gnosticism. The main argument can be formed as follows: If Creation marks the beginning of time, as we know and experience it, and if there was a period of time during which Christ was not, this necessarily means that Creation had started before Christ Himself was born or created. It follows that the elements forming Creation can contain a divine character and a divine quality which gave rise to Christ. If this is so, then the self-sufficiency of the cosmic reality and the understanding of its essence as an all-embracing rational entity are also implied by the Arian's ideology simply by being of the kind (*EIDOS*) with the idea concerning the divinity of the elements of the world.<sup>36</sup>

Against these notions Irenaeos first and Athanasios later tried to hold the teaching of the Church and successfully prevented the occur-

33. On this point cf. Cullmann, O.: *Salvation in History*, London 1967 (English Translation), pp. 24-28; *ibid.*, *Christ and Time*, London 1967<sup>6</sup> (English Translation), pp. 55-60; and my critical introduction of the Greek edition of the later, Athens 1973.

34. Cf. Cullmann, O.: *Christ and Time*, London 1967<sup>6</sup>, p. 55f.

35. Cf. Theodorou, A.: *Justin, The Philosopher and Martyr*, Athens 1970 (in Greek).

36. Cf. Footnotes 3, 4, and 5.

rence of any innovations in the realm of the doctrinal teachings concerning creation, space and time. Thus they paved the way for the Cappadocians. It is not the right place here for one to deal with the Cappadocian's treatment of the doctrine of Creation,<sup>37</sup> but a few words should be said concerning the position which both Irenaeos and Athanasios held in reference to the particular problem under discussion. Both of them stood out for the Biblical understanding and foundation of the doctrine of Creation. Irenaeos had to face the various syncretic novelties introduced by the Gnostics<sup>38</sup>, while Athanasios was obliged to make his stance against Arians' monism.<sup>39</sup> The Biblical doctrine of Creation as far as they are concerned is simple and clear, and it can in no case be fused or confused with any kind of philosophical speculation.<sup>40</sup> The Triune God creates the whole universe out of nothing (*EX NIHILO*) and because of His benevolent and all-loving will.<sup>41</sup> This means that there is no divine element inherent in the essence of Creation and also that its purpose is to be found in God's creative will rather than in any rationality, order, harmony, self-sufficiency and autonomy, which may well be observed in its existence, but in reality they are the manifestations of its ultimate purpose set by God its Creator Himself.<sup>42</sup> Finally, one may say that the Church emerged victorious from these decisive struggles, because She managed to preserve the only thing that kept Her from ruin, namely, the Biblical understanding of Creation as the core of the whole of redemptive history.<sup>43</sup>

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37. Cf. my MTh. thesis, section III.

38. Cf. Cullmann, O.: *Salvation in History*, London 1967, pp. 26, 28, 76, and 170.

39. Cf. The excellent article of George Florovsky, *The Concept of Creation in Saint Athanasius*, SP VI, Berlin 1962, pp. 36-57.

40. As in fn. 39.

41. On this particular point cf. Nissiotis, N.: *Prolegomena to the Christian Gnoseology*, Athens 1970 (in Greek), p. 66f.

42. Here the entire theology of the uncreated activities of God finds its paramount basis. Founded by the early Fathers and fully developed by the various Orthodox theologians of the 14th century it safeguards indeed the ecclesiastical understanding of Creation from any subordination to, or any fusion and confusion with, philosophical speculations of any kind. M.P.G. 150, 1180BC; cf. Florovsky, G.: *Gregory Palamas and the Patristic Tradition*, GOTR 2, 1960, pp. 128-130; and Meyendorff, J.: *Introduction à l'étude de Grégoire Palamas*, Paris 1959, p. 279f.

43. Cf. Cullmann, O.: *Salvation in History*, London 1967, p. 26f.