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The Fall and Natural Suffering

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ABSTRACT:

Evolutionary theory poses several questions for Christian notions of origins: first, common ancestry of all creatures rather than monogenesis; second, the violent history of evolution as a challenge to the notion of a fall from paradise into sin, death, and suffering; and third, the relationship between suffering and evil in light of evolutionary process. This article seeks to address the concept of the fall in the context of dialogue between evolution and the Christian faith.

The Fall and Natural Suffering

by Andrew Banacos

INTRODUCTION

The Jewish and Christian traditions have confessed that God is one, that God alone is creator, and that God is good. As early Christians began to develop their identity in relation to their Greco-Roman religious neighbors, theologians of the Church came to understand the narrative of the universe as creation, fall, and redemption. For Christians, the fall became one way to explain the origins of evil and suffering in a creation that is good. The apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the church of Rome: “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death



through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned” (Rom. 5:12).

Given the length of time and scope of predation, suffering, and death that predate the emergence of *homo sapiens sapiens*, evolutionary theory poses as a potential problem for traditional Christian understandings of the beginning. If suffering and death are present before humans enter the scene, are suffering and death part of God’s design? Does evolutionary theory require critical revisions to the myth of the fall or should the fall be jettisoned from Christian theological construction?

In this paper, I will explore whether the fall has any place within systematic theology given the world’s long history of evolutionary suffering and death. First, I will provide a brief account of the fall as understood by the western and eastern patristics followed by the response of eastern and western churches in the advent of evolutionary theory’s acceptance by the scientific community. Second, I will highlight the trends within Catholic and Orthodox reflection on the fall through Elizabeth Johnson and Sergius Bulgakov and the relevant issues that each thinker exemplifies. Lastly, I will provide a way forward that considers the insights of both the eastern and western traditions. In my argument, I hope to demonstrate the need and warrant to discard the fall from theological construction in order for scientific discovery to offer any genuine contribution to theological reflection.

THE FALL OF CREATION

A. The Church of Early to Late Antiquity

The concept of a primordial fall in the Christian tradition takes root in the Genesis 1-3 narratives. Early Christians interpreted Genesis as a story of creation’s fall into sin and death. In Romans, Paul portrays the figure of Adam as the progenitor of sin and death into the cosmos and, hence, the antithesis to Christ who gives grace (Rom 5:12-21). Points of disagreement emerge between the eastern and western traditions over what change(s) sin brought upon creation.¹

1 Alexander V Khramov, “Fitting Evolution into Christian Belief. An Eastern Orthodox Approach,” *International Journal of Orthodox Theology* 8, no. 1 (2017). I am indebted to Khramov’s analysis of the predominant two approaches to the Genesis 1-3 narrative.

1. Western Theology and the Augustinian Tradition of the Fall

Following Augustine's interpretation of Genesis 1-3, the western tradition of the Church developed an understanding of the fall that included three major components. First, western theology tended to understand God's final redemption of the world as superior to the edenic life of Adam and Eve.² In his commentary on Genesis, Augustine argues that the bodies of the redeemed will be an improvement of the original bodies that Adam and Eve had in the garden.³ Second, western theology understood the body's functions before and after the fall as essentially identical. Aside from the pervasiveness of sin, suffering, and death of bodies, the postlapsarian body performs the same functions as it did before.⁴ One example of this is Augustine's view of sexuality. In *City of God*, Augustine argues that sexual intercourse was always part of God's design for creation but that the fall of humanity disordered the human will and sexual function. While humans had control over their genitalia through their power of volition before the fall, lust is now in control of the sexual function.⁵ Third, western theology largely discounted any notion of cosmic redemption.⁶ Aquinas expresses this perspective when he asserts that plants and animals will not participate in the resurrection due to their lack of rational souls.⁷

2. Eastern Patristic Tradition

In contrast, the eastern patristic tradition—including the Alexandrian, Cappadocian, and Byzantine schools—has interpreted the fall narrative through a different set of hermeneutical convictions. First, the eastern patristic tradition tends to view eschatology as a return of humanity to its prelapsarian state. When Gregory of Nyssa read Christ's words that humans would be like the angels in the resurrection, he concluded that

2 Khramov, "Fitting Evolution into Christian Belief," 84.

3 Augustine of Hippo, "The Literal Meaning of Genesis," in *On Genesis*, trans. E. Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002), 321. Cited in Khramov, "Fitting Evolution into Christian Belief: An Eastern Orthodox Approach," 84.

4 Nyssen, *DAR (NPNF2 5:464a-467d)*.

5 Augustine, *City of God*, 14.16 (*NPNF1 2:276a*).

6 Khramov, "Fitting Evolution into Christian Belief," 84.

7 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3-supp.91.5. (New York: Benziger, 1947).

humans were like angels before the fall. Second, the eastern patristic tradition views the fall not only as subjection to sin and death but also as fundamental change to the biosphere. Gregory of Nyssa interprets the “tunics of skin” in Genesis 3:21 as accretions God gives to humanity in response to the fall. Among these accretions, he includes sexual procreation, breastfeeding, eating, and defecation. These are not a punishment for sin but serve rather as a consolation, a means of survival in this world subject now to death.⁸ Third, the eastern patristics often include some notion of a cosmic fall in which all creatures share in the burden of death as a result of sin. Gregory uses the image of a mirror to illustrate this. He depicts the entire cosmos as a mirror reflecting, through its own beauty, the infinite beauty of God. Humanity created according to the divine image reflects this beauty insofar as it is ordered by reason. Humanity reflects this beauty to the rest of creation as its form. When humanity departs from its initial contemplation of God, this beauty is distorted not only for humanity but the rest of creation as well.⁹

B. The Advent of Evolutionary Theory

1. Western Theology and the Fall

The western Church has responded to evolutionary theory in four different approaches: 1) defend the fall and reject evolutionary theory, 2) accept both without resolving the conflict, 3) revise the fall so that it no longer contradicts science yet holds onto the Christian narrative, or 4) reject the fall and receive the findings of science as advantageous for Christian theologizing.¹⁰ The first approach—more commonly known as intelligent design—is predominant among conservative evangelical churches. This approach attempts to prove the existence of God as an explanation for meticulous survival skills of certain species while disproving evolutionary theory. Human imagination reduces the divine to a “God of the gaps,” a deity that is invoked to fill gaps in scientific

8 Nyssen, *DAR* (NPNF2 5:464a-467d).

9 Nyssen, *DV* (NPNF2 5:358-359).

10 James K. Smith illustrates well the problem that removal of the Fall from the Christian narrative. James K. Smith, “What Stands on the Fall?” in *Evolution and the Fall*, eds. William T. Cavanaugh and James K. Smith (William B. Eerdmans), 48-66.

knowledge of the universe. In making this move, the intelligent design movement makes a category error: attempting to prove the existence of a transcendent God by means of empirical evidence.

Because the second approach fails to give an account of how science and theology are related, we will skip to the third approach, which attempts to adhere to Christian tradition of the fall while accepting the findings of science. Theologians who adopt this third approach emphasize God's election of humanity in their emergence within evolutionary history, humanity's rejection of this vocation, the fall as a "metaphor" for the moral imperfection of the entire created order,¹¹ and an angelic fall preceding the cosmic fall with the demonic forces as the cause of disruption in God's good creation and the cause of suffering and death that spurns evolution. This third approach creates a problem out of suffering within the cosmic process. By identifying all suffering as evil without a primordial fall as its cause, God becomes the author of evil.¹²

Rather than rejecting evolutionary theory or reimagining the myth of the fall, the fourth approach views the ongoing discoveries of science as a *contribution* to the discipline of theology. As one can see, all bodies *as they are*—including nonhuman ones—become a source of both reflection and genuine theological contribution. I will explore this approach further in the next section. For now, we will turn to Eastern Orthodoxy's answer to evolution.

2. *Eastern Orthodoxy and the Fall*

Eastern Orthodoxy comes to this conversation from a different angle. There are Orthodox theologians who reject evolutionary theory as in conflict with the narrative of Scripture. Seraphim Rose, for example, does not differ much in his rejection of science from evangelical adherents of intellectual

11 John Haught holds to a similar idea. The issue arises that by inscribing evil into the system as God created it, God becomes the cause of suffering and evil in creation. See John F. Haught, *Making Sense of Evolution: Darwin, God, and the Drama of Life* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

12 James K. Smith illustrates well the problem that removal of the Fall from the Christian narrative. James K. Smith, "What Stands on the Fall?" in *Evolution and the Fall*, eds. William T. Cavanaugh and James K. Smith (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans), 50.

design.¹³ However, the witness of the eastern patristics provides grounds for an alternate approach to the interplay between theology science. Gregory of Nyssa's understanding of prelapsarian and postlapsarian creation suggests a complete alteration to the form of their embodiment. This understanding of the fall has led some eastern theologians to view unfallen creation beyond the reach of empirical inquiry.¹⁴

CONTEMPORARY RESPONSES TO THE EVOLUTION AND THE FALL

A. Theological Reflections on Evolution

1. Elizabeth Johnson

Elizabeth Johnson is an ecological, feminist, and Catholic theologian whose work addresses the topic of natural suffering. In *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love*, Johnson proposes a call for humans to a “sacramental beholding” of all creatures, an ecological reading of Genesis 1-3, a pneumatology of divine presence within the ongoing process of creation, and a christology that decenters traditional understanding of human exceptionality.

Sacramental beholding trains one to see everything clearly.¹⁵ Johnson dedicates significant reflection on Darwin as a model of beholding the details of the natural world. In contrast with rather romantic or idealistic depictions of the created order, Darwin spoke truthfully regarding what he observed. By doing so, he was able to understand the processes necessary for the survival and diversity of life within the biosphere and constructed a model of evolution by natural selection.¹⁶ Johnson disagrees with Darwin and other natural materialists that the evolution undermines the existence of God. For Johnson, God and the evolutionary process are not in competition with one another because God is not one being among other beings but the ground of being. *Sacramental beholding* transcends naturalism and sees creaturely predation,

13 See Seraphim Rose, *Genesis, Creation, and Early Man*, (Platina, CA: St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 2000).

14 Khramov, “Fitting Evolution into Christian Belief,” 75-105.

15 Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 42.

16 Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 40-43.

adaptation, natural selection, and death as natural processes undergirded by the work of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷

In her reading of Genesis 1-3, Johnson shifts the discussion away from the fall, which she finds incompatible with evolutionary theory. Instead, she attends to the *imago Dei* language in relation to the rest of creation. As Johnson notes, the Genesis narrative was written in a historical context during which humanity was at the bottom of the food chain and nonhuman life posed a daily threat to human life. Johnson invites her readers to a reading of the text that considers today's context and recognizes humanity's contribution to the suffering and extinction of other species, human pollution of the biosphere, and the stagnancy of Christian response. Instead of interpreting Genesis through the lens of human exceptionalism and abusive power over nonhuman creation, Johnson offers a reading that calls humans into neighborly love towards other creatures.¹⁸

For her understanding of the Spirit's activity in nature, Johnson draws from Aquinas's distinction between primary and secondary causality. God as primary cause continually creates. Simultaneously, created matter explores possibilities through the ongoing process of evolution. Hence, creatures as secondary causes participate in their own creation. The Spirit works "in, with, and under" the free operations of creatures.¹⁹ In rejecting the fall as an explanation for natural suffering, sacramental beholding also entails seeing such suffering of creation not through moralizing evolutionary suffering as stemming from sin but seeing creation *as it is* as "very good." However, Johnson does not attribute any suffering and death to God's eternal will nor does she ascribe any transcendent purpose to them. As secondary causes, they participate in the Spirit's creativity through their evolutionary becoming. Johnson agrees that Christians must work to alleviate suffering that is a result of personal and systemic sin, but she argues that Christians must also come to accept natural suffering as creative and reflecting Christ's own suffering.²⁰

17 Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 158.

18 Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 280.

19 Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 191.

20 Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 197. Suffering and death are not the goal of creation, but they are part of the process of creation's unfolding.

Lastly, Johnson's Christology of deep incarnation, deep atonement, and deep resurrection drives her understanding of God's love for each creature. In taking on flesh, Christ joins not just humanity but all creation to the divine. Instead of following Anselm's feudal metaphor for the atonement, Johnson adopts Duns Scotus's understanding that incarnation is the purpose of creation. The depth of the incarnation, atonement, and resurrection entails Christ taking up the entire creation and bringing them in union with God.²¹

2. *Sergius Bulgakov*

In his major work *The Bride of the Lamb*, Sergius Bulgakov's theological framework hinges on his understanding of the relationship between creation and creator. He explains his system through his understanding of *creatio ex nihilo*, theological anthropology, the fall, God's relationship to suffering and death, and cosmic *theosis*. First, Bulgakov argues that Christian theology must avoid the danger of pantheistic or atheistic monism on one end (the idea that God is everything or that everything is materialistic) and dualism (the idea of two gods, often opposing forces of good and evil) on the other end.²² The doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* avoids this danger by establishing God as creator of all existence.²³ Creation, therefore, is not identical to God but has its being in God.²⁴

Second, Bulgakov views humanity as the apex of creation or the *microcosmos*. That is, humanity contains all levels of life within itself. In addition, humans are created uniquely in the *imago Dei* by the Spirit of God breathing into them. Hence, creation is ordered towards humanity who serve as priests of the cosmos. As priests, humans are mediators between God and the cosmos.²⁵

Third, Bulgakov's notion of the fall transcends our current experience of time. He notes how his understanding of humanity as uniquely created in the image of God appears to conflict with a naturalist understanding of

21 Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 238-239.

22 Sergius Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, trans. Boris Jakim (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2002), 3.

23 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 6.

24 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 10.

25 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 77.

humanity formed by evolution.²⁶ Bulgakov interprets Genesis 1-3 through the lens of the eastern patristic tradition. He asserts that original creation and its subsequent fall are part of a “meta-history,” a real event that transcends empirical examination and is only accessible by the revelation of Scripture.²⁷ The “Adam” of this meta-history, who encompasses all fallen humanity, is created good by God but is deceived by the devil into sin.²⁸ Because of humanity’s priestly role, the entire cosmos falls into disorder, suffering, and death.²⁹

Fourth, the suffering and death within evolution have no origin in God; rather, the event of the fall inaugurates the movement from God’s time for creation in God’s being to fallen time. In fallen time, creatures come into being through the process of evolution marked by suffering and death. Though God sees all suffering or death as blemishes upon creation, God works through the unfolding evolutionary process in the face of creatures’ alienated state. All death and suffering have their origin in the meta-history of humanity’s sin.³⁰

Fifth, the Son’s assumption of human nature has ramifications for all creatures. In connection to humanity’s priestly role is the goal of creation itself: *theosis*. For Bulgakov, creation and salvation are two aspects of the single divine act. Through the incarnation, the Son assumes humanity, thus uniting it to Godself. Because humanity is the microcosm and

26 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 73-74.

27 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 170. At this point, one may understandably ask what warrants such a reading of Genesis 1-3. As noted previously, the concept of the fall and its corollary of original sin were an unfolding process of reflection, development, and revision in the early Church. One’s attachment to the concept of the fall is partially connected to one’s levels of trust and criticism regarding the patristics, but the fall is also connected to other significant doctrines as will be noted.

28 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 171-172.

29 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 173-174. This is how Bulgakov interprets Romans 8:19-21.

30 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 17. I have intentionally left out Bulgakov’s sophiology as to avoid veering off topic. For Bulgakov, the divine sophia (which is eternal yet distinct from God and not a hypostasis) contains the prototypes of all creatures that come into being throughout time. The creaturely Sophia reflects this divine sophia and ensures the process of creation within time in accordance with God’s ordering. This sophia has been inhibited but not obliterated by the entrance of death and sin into the world. This is part of Bulgakov’s way of ensuring God’s immutability as creator in eternity while distinguishing from its instantiation in time.

mediator of grace to the rest of creation, Christ grafts the entire cosmos into the divine life in assuming flesh. The incarnation makes possible *theosis* for all creation.³¹

B. Issues Raised

1. *Nature and Grace: Creation's Goodness and Salvation from Death*

One of the issues raised in ecotheological reflections is the relationship between creation and salvation. Johnson insists that suffering and death are intrinsic to the creative process. She writes in response to John Haught:

Haught argues that to acknowledge death in this context would weaken the moral fiber of our resistance to death. Again, I think this confuses evil wrought by human deeds, against which we should indeed fight with every ounce of strength, with the occurrence of natural dying, which theology needs to respect, even for human beings. How could we ever fight against and overcome the death of millions of pelican chicks outside the nest, and why would we even want to?³²

If suffering and death are intrinsic to the process of creation, God must then overcome an intrinsic part of the natural process in order to save it. Johnson argues that death and suffering are not part of God's direct will but result from creation's autonomy in the process of becoming. Johnson's understanding is that divine willing and creation's willing are not in competition and so avoids the problem of a "God of the gaps."³³ The Spirit as grace perfects nature not by preventing death but by groaning with creation in its depths, the Son dying with creation, and the Father vindicating the Son in the Spirit through the resurrection.³⁴

Bulgakov answers this relationship of nature and grace in a different manner. Creation as gift intended by God transcends the fallen state that creation suffers now. Resurrection is the fulfillment of this grace over the power of death. Hence, his understanding of the fall and

31 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 301.

32 Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 190.

33 Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 163.

34 Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 209.

meta-history allows Bulgakov to appeal to an ideal creation free from all suffering and death.³⁵

2. *The Relationship between Death, Suffering, and Evil*

Johnson wishes to distinguish between suffering and death as a result of injustice and creaturely contingency. One aspect of her conviction is ethical. In making this distinction, Johnson posits a type of suffering and death rooted in finitude that we all must come to terms with and another that should be worked against. In addition, Johnson argues that predation and death of life are not the result of evil or sin but simply the inevitable means of survival.³⁶ Without the fall, the link between sin and suffering is broken, as Bulgakov himself suggests.³⁷ Others such as Haught argue that death and suffering are disvalues to creation.³⁸ Haught's position is difficult to justify without a clearly defined causal link between sin and all instances of death.

3. *Creaturely Relationality*

One significant aspect of the fall paradigm is its view of humanity's relationship to the rest of creation. Even in Eastern Orthodoxy where we find more traces of cosmic redemption, humanity is viewed as the head of creation, its goal, and the mediator of grace to nonhuman creation.³⁹ Because of the emphasis on humanity's uniqueness as the image of God, Bulgakov places stress on the emergence of humanity as sudden and as the result of direct divine action rather than evolutionary development.⁴⁰ Johnson, like Bulgakov, emphasizes incarnation and resurrection in her understanding of atonement on the cosmic level. She also recognizes that human beings have a unique level of intelligence from other creatures. However, she notes that scientists are discovering that the gap between human and nonhuman creatures is not as wide as once previously deemed.⁴¹

35 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 301.

36 Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 190-191.

37 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 149-150.

38 Haught, *Making Sense of Evolution*

39 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 301.

40 Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, 177.

41 Johnson, *Ask the Beasts*, 238-239.

A WAY FORWARD

The myth of the fall remains a serious question for Christian theology in relation to science. Bulgakov's understanding of the fall provides an answer that fits well with traditional interpretations of other theological concepts and evolutionary theory. However, there are some possible weaknesses that his argument exemplifies. First, Bulgakov's anthropology presumes that creation is made for humanity, a presumption built upon rationalism and the patristic tradition of interpretation. While the text of Scripture can be read this way and has been historically, Johnson's suggestion for a renewed reading in the face of our ecological crisis invokes a call to rethink humanity's relationship to the rest of creation. Modern science has pushed back against such a strict discontinuity between humanity and other creatures. By appealing to eastern patristic readings of Genesis, Bulgakov's system leaves no room for science to contribute new material for theological revision. Second, Bulgakov's understanding of the fall presumes that nonhuman creatures suffer death because of human sin. Placing nonhuman creatures in this position may provide a tight system at the theoretical level, but it does not resonate well with the amount of suffering that creatures have endured throughout all time. Any reading of Genesis that does not resonate with lived experience should be reconsidered. Third, Bulgakov's understanding of the fall and the beauty of creation leaves no room for death or suffering as intrinsic to the creative process. Rather, death and suffering are malformities that have latched upon a fallen creation and so are an inevitable part of creation's unfolding in fallen time. While this system is emotionally compelling for its attempts to ground creation's beauty in what is pleasant, such an approach might also be the grounds for its critique.

Johnson's contribution to the discussion on natural sufferings avoids two common pitfalls: 1) attributing death and suffering to God's will and 2) ascribing moral value to death and suffering. If God is not the cause of death and suffering but rather is part of the creaturely process 'from below' of becoming, then the coherence of God's economy of creation and salvation is maintained. Additionally, Johnson's vision of death helps us to reconcile with creation *as it is*. All creatures must pass through

death including humans. As a theological system, Johnson's work provides a way for coming to terms with the enormity of death and suffering in this world by reconciling with its reality and provides a method to begin thinking about what we can improve for the better in our relation to nonhuman creation. Borrowing from the eastern church's emphasis on cosmic redemption, Johnson takes this a step further and decentralizes humanity in the economy of salvation. Furthermore, I suggest that we can resolve the tension between nature and grace within Johnson's work by positing that death and resurrection are both part of creation's nature revealed in Christ. While Johnson's approach does not entail a final word on the matter, it allows room for further developments within science to contribute to the discussion.



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