

The Compact Orthodox Catechism: Part 4

The Creation and Man

This treatment of creation focuses on the theology of creation, the creation of man, man's nature, man's place in the creation and the fall of man from grace. It is outside the scope of this study to deal with creation fully or to thoroughly cover the life of man prior to the advent of the Savior Jesus Christ Our God. Familiarity with the Biblical accounts of creation and the major events and persons of the Old Testament is assumed.

The Church teaches that God created everything—everything that existed in the past, exists now, or ever will exist—nothing exists that was not created by Him.

Wait a minute! Hasn't man created many things? We say that man "creates," but actually man fabricates and builds from things that already exist. God creates from nothing (ex nihilo). God spoke and it came to be.

Man comes closest to God's creativity in art and design, but even here man draws from concepts, principles, images, colors, shapes and other attributes of already existing things. Only God truly creates from nothing.

God created everything visible and everything invisible, that is, everything material and everything spiritual. This includes the physical universe and the laws and principles that govern it.

Did God create evil, sin and death? No, because evil, sin and death don't actually exist in and of themselves. They are the absence or perversion of good—good that does exist in what God is and does. We'll come back to this later.

Who among the Trinity participated in creation? All three participated, each in accordance with His place or role within the Trinity (see Part 3, The Triune God).

Why did God create?

Was it a need, or a perceived lack? Was it the challenge? The Church rules out these motives because they ascribe want or lack to God, of which He is completely free.

No explicit answer can be found in the scriptures or the doctrine of the Church that states why God created. However, the consensus among patristic theologians ascribes God's motive for creation to His overflowing, abundant Love. God created because He wanted the super-abundant life and goodness within Himself to be shared by other beings who would become partakers of His divine being, blessings and holiness. In other words, God created out of His super-abundance and not out of need or lack.

The Genesis account of the creation

The Orthodox Church has not established a dogma regarding the scientific accuracy of the biblical account of creation or of evolution. The Church holds that the Genesis account relates the essential truth of what took place in the creation in a form that is comprehensible and pertinent to man.

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While not discounting the veracity of Old Testament accounts of people and events, the Orthodox Church generally treats the Old Testament as symbolic, as representing a deeper reality and truth rather than absolute historical or scientific fact.

The Order of Creation

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). This verse is understood as saying that God created two worlds, one invisible, spiritual and perceptible only to the intellect, and the other visible and material.

The second verse of Genesis states that the earth was “without form and void,” or as the Orthodox Study Bible translates this verse, “invisible and unfinished.” Patristic theology teaches that the heavens, the spiritual world, were fully created first with its inhabitants, the angels. The angels are incorporeal spirits who possess intellect and freewill.

Patristic and Hebrew traditions hold that the angels are not all equal in dignity and closeness to God. They differ too in role and function. Dionysius the Areopagite names three angelic hierarchies with each hierarchy divided into three ranks. The first and highest contains the seraphim, cherubim and thrones; the second, dominions, powers and authorities; and the third, principalities, archangels and angels. Tradition teaches that the angels vastly outnumber all the human beings who have ever lived.

Although the scriptures make frequent mention of angels, no detailed descriptions of angels are given. The prophetic books of the Old Testament (Isaiah and Ezekiel) do provide some description of the angels, but are not comprehensive in their description.

The Orthodox Church also holds that each human being has a guardian angel that attends to him during his life and is with him through the final judgment.

The patristic consensus is that Lucifer had already fallen, with the angels that fell with him, before Man was created.

God completes His creation of the earth, separating the dry land from the water, and then calling into being the living creatures that inhabit the earth, first the plant life of the earth, the sun, moon and stars, and then the living creatures of the sea, the birds of the air and finally the living animals that inhabit the dry land.

God created man in His own image and likeness as the crown of His Creation; male and female He made them.

God formed man of the dust from the ground and breathed on him. This breath of life is the grace of the Holy Spirit, the giver of life. God breathed the breath of life into man and he became a living soul.

Man was created to be by grace what God is by nature. However, this does not mean that we share in God’s essence which would be impossible for any creature. Man was made to participate in and partake of the uncreated energies of God; in this way, we participate in His nature. These energies are not separate from God; they are God. It is in and through these divine energies that man can know God.

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Man was created with free will—he is not constrained to love and obey his Creator. He must choose whether, or not, he will love and obey.

Man was created with a body and soul and was clothed in light until his disobedience. Man was created with the potential for eternal life; this life flows from, and consists of, man's communion with God. Man does not have eternal life in himself apart from God.

Orthodox theology teaches that the human soul is spiritual and immaterial; it is the seat of his spirit, intellect and will. The Church teaches that man's soul has three powers: intelligence, desire and drive.

Orthodox Christianity does not view the body as evil or as being of a lower order than the soul as do some religions and philosophies. The body and soul were created to be together. Therefore, the separation of the body and soul in physical death is not natural but is the result of sin and the mercy of God.

Man was created as the nexus, or interface, between the created and uncreated, serving both God and the visible creation. Man was created to be the ruler and caretaker of the visible creation.

Though man was created perfect, he was not created mature and fully developed. This full realization of his nature had to come through choosing to love, trust and obey God, remaining in communion with God, and coming to a full knowledge of God and of himself. Man was still in the beginning stages of this maturation process when he fell through disobedience.

Orthodox theology teaches that God commanded that Adam and Eve not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil or of the tree of life because of their immaturity, and that as they matured in obedience and union with God, they would have been permitted to partake of these fruits.

Even in his immaturity, man had full union with God, and God gave Adam and Eve dominion over creation. God even invited man to participate in completing creation and setting it in order, as represented by Adam's naming of the living creatures.

Man's fall from Grace

Chapter 3 of Genesis recounts the fall of man through disobedience and unrepentance. First, the serpent, who is the devil, asks Eve if God has forbidden the fruit of any of the trees of the garden. When Eve answers that God has forbidden the trees in the middle of the garden, the serpent says to Eve that she will not die if she eats this fruit, as God said she would, but will become like God, knowing good and evil. As we know, she accepts the serpent's word over God's and eats of the tree; and Adam joins her in disobedience. Their eyes are opened and they become aware of their nakedness, which Orthodox theologians say resulted from the loss of the garment of light with which they were covered until they disobeyed God.

When they were found out by God, they did not repent but attempted to justify their actions. Many Orthodox theologians hold that God would have forgiven Adam and Eve had

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they been straightforward and repentant about their disobedience and pleaded with God for mercy rather than hiding from God and then trying to justify themselves.

Man chose to trust the deceiver instead of God and disobeyed God's commandment to them. Thus, they cut themselves off from the knowledge of God, which was their life, and established physical death for all mankind. God expelled Adam and Eve from paradise and pronounced the curse upon them, the loss of paradise, the state of grace and union with God they had enjoyed.

The action of God in expelling Adam and Eve from paradise was an act of love aimed at bringing them to repentance so that they would return to God asking humbly for mercy and restoration. God did not create death, but by permitting it, God precluded the possibility of an eternity separated from Him, not only for Adam and Eve but for all their progeny, as well.

Unlike the western church, the Orthodox Church does not teach that man lost the image of God in his fall from Grace, nor does it teach that man became totally depraved as result of his fall.

The image and likeness of God in man was marred by the fall, but not destroyed. Man suffered a great loss of grace as a result of his breach of trust in God, his disobedience, and lack of repentance. However, he was not left entirely without grace.

The fall and the curse impacted all of creation. Physical reality changed, as did relationships among living creatures. No longer in paradise, man had to labor for his food; and the whole creation was subjected to futility through the fall. Man's role as caretaker was not rescinded, but without the abundance of grace he previously knew, carrying out this role was impossible. As sin increased, the harmony with creation that Adam and Eve knew in the garden was almost entirely lost.

The Orthodox Church does not teach that we share in Adam and Eve's sin or in their guilt. Orthodoxy does teach that, as Adam's seed, we inherit from Adam a strong proclivity toward sin so that all have sinned and "there is none righteous, no not one..." We can trace our sinfulness back to Adam, but we do not share his sin or responsibility for it. We bear responsibility only for our own sin (which includes causing others to sin).

Orthodoxy teaches that Adam and Eve's disobedience did not come as a surprise to God. When the Holy Trinity took counsel among itself with regard to the creation of man, they knew that man would fall and that, ultimately, God the Word would have to join Himself to man to destroy death, restore man to union again with God and heal the creation. The salvation of man was not "Plan B," but was recognized and integrated with the creation of man from the beginning.

The Life of Man after the Fall

After Adam and Eve fell from grace, they had children. This "second generation" of mankind exhibited obedience and love for God, and also disobedience and great sin—the murder of Abel by Cain. Generation after generation, there continued to be a few righteous men and

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women who trusted in and obeyed God. However, there were increasingly more who were given to sin, effectively forgetting God altogether. There finally came a point that God destroyed all mankind except for Noah and his family. The result was a new start for mankind on earth.

The remembrance of the Flood may have been effective initially in curbing disobedience and godlessness as man repopulated the earth. However, after many generations, man had again become generally godless and disobedient. Rather than destroying mankind again, God chose a righteous man, Abram, to be the father of a new nation, His chosen people. Abraham believed God and, through his seed, the nation of Israel arose, the bearers of the promise of God that a land would be given to them and they would become a great nation. This promise was realized through Moses who led Israel out of bondage in Egypt to the promised land. On this journey, Moses received the law from God, the Ten Commandments, by which Israel was to live. Through the prophets, a promise was given that a savior, a great, godly ruler, would arise from among them. Under this ruler, Israel would overcome all adversaries and rise to a great height which would be sustained indefinitely in power and godliness.

Nonetheless, the pattern of disobedience, unbelief and sinfulness prevailed up to the coming of the Savior, Jesus Christ—even in the nation of Israel, the people of the promised savior. However, there was a remnant in each generation who kept God’s commandments, remaining faithful and humble before God their Creator. Although they were under the Law, they believed God and their faith was accounted as righteousness, like their father Abraham.

Orthodox teaching on the life of man after the fall and before the advent of Jesus Christ is similar to that of western Christianity except in one major point. Orthodoxy holds that the effects of Jesus’ incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension were available to mankind before as well as after His advent. In other words, a person living before Jesus’ coming could be saved in the same manner and by the same power as those of us living after His advent. The Orthodox view is that salvation for man that is in Jesus Christ is not bound by time even though it was achieved in time. The difference, of course, is what mankind understood before Jesus’ coming versus what we understand now.

Israel through the prophets anticipated a savior, and those who believed the prophets and obeyed God’s commandments are saved just as those who believe in Jesus Christ following His incarnation.

The Problem of Evil

Many people find it difficult, or even impossible, to believe that God can be both loving and all-powerful. They ask, “If God is all-powerful and loving, how can He permit such evil and suffering as do clearly exist in the world? If man is created in God’s image, how could He allow him to fall into sin and evil doing?”

The answer is simple: God created man with free will, as would be necessary for man to be created in God’s image and likeness. This freedom is basic to man’s being and God will not

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violate man's freewill. When man chooses to do evil, God creates circumstances that encourage and enable repentance and soften the consequences of our sinful choices. But when men becomes hardened in sin through the exercise of the freewill God gave him, God will permit man to suffer the consequences of his sinful choices in order to turn him from his evil behavior. And, as we know, man all too often continues in sin and evil doing leading to horrible suffering for himself and others—sometimes on a massive scale.

This was completely foreseen by God. He knew that man would sin and do evil. That is why, in the creation account in Genesis, it is said that God took counsel with Himself in deciding to create man in His own image. God foreknew that man would use this freewill to choose sin making it necessary for the Son of God to himself become man and save man through His death and resurrection. And even this glorious salvation in Jesus Christ can, and often is, rejected by man in favor of continuing in sinful independence from God.