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From: [Orthodoxy and Creationism](#)

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(this is a brief portion from a longer article)

From the New Testament writers to the Fathers and beyond there have existed several ways of interpreting the biblical text, historically if that is appropriate, typologically or allegorically if that is where the spiritual sense lies. No patristic biblical commentator felt constrained by the Scriptures thus interpreted to deny any aspect of truth discovered in other spheres of human activity. This attitude is characterised by St. Augustine in a commentary on Genesis from which I shall quote at length. This will connect what I am claiming about Orthodox biblical interpretation to the more positive aspects of Orthodoxy's contribution to this debate. St. Augustine said this:-

"Even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world, about the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions, about the predictable eclipses of the sun and moon, the cycles of the years and the seasons, about the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones, and so forth, and this knowledge he holds as being certain from reason and experience.

Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn.

The shame is not so much that an ignorant individual is derided, but that people outside the household of faith think our sacred writers held such opinions, and, to the great loss of those for whose salvation we toil, the writers of our Scripture are criticized and rejected as unlearned men.

If they find a Christian mistaken in a field which they themselves know well and hear him maintaining his foolish opinions about our books, how are they going to believe those books in matters concerning the resurrection of the dead, the hope of eternal life,

and the kingdom of heaven, when they think their pages are full of falsehoods and on facts which they themselves have learnt from experience and the light of reason?"

[Saint Augustine, On the Literal Meaning of Genesis, Book 1, Chapter 19]

Without knowledge you might be excused for thinking that St. Augustine was alive today and writing for today. Sadly, maybe little changes. What is presented here is an approach taken by the Fathers more generally to the relationship between revealed truth and the natural sciences and humanities. This attitude is found even in the first 300 years when the Church was persecuted by the world. St. Justin the Philosopher, (165), a martyr no less, saw Christ as the fulfilment of classical Greek religious impulses with Plato as a type of Greek "Moses." Clement of Alexandria in this same period (215) wrote the following:-

"Scripture gives the common name of wisdom to all the earthly sciences and arts generally, everything that the human mind can achieve... for every art and every knowledge comes from God."

[Clement of Alexandria]

It is true that some Fathers were less accommodating. Tertullian (who was later to go AWOL with the Montanists) declaimed: "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?" Nonetheless, Christians rarely despised secular learning as such and after the legalization of Christianity a much stronger position emerged. The Cappadocian Fathers in the fourth century welcomed the sciences and arts as handmaids to theology. [For example]:

"every one who has an intellect recognizes scholarship as a primary blessing for us. And not only this noble scholarship of our own, which... has as its subject only salvation and the beauty of what is contemplated by the mind, but also the external scholarship which many Christians abhor out of ignorance as unreliable, dangerous and diverting from God".

[St. Gregory the Theologian, 389]

For two millennia Orthodox theologising has proceeded on this basis. We cannot survey this whole period but to complete the witness let us consider two more recent Russian thinkers, the first a saint of the 19th century, St. Philaret of Moscow, (1867).

“The faith in Christ is not in conflict with the true knowledge, because it is not in union with ignorance”.

The second reflects the work of a contemporary Russian Orthodox deacon, Andrey Kuraev, who has done much to remind the Russian Church of the harmony between science and faith. In a lecture arguing for a more positive evaluation of evolution he based this on Genesis itself but in a quite unforced manner. He refers both to St. Philaret and St. Basil:

“In the Book of Genesis God names every creature and by this naming calls every creature from the abyss of non-being. In the lovely expression of St. Philaret of Moscow, the creative "Word articulates all creatures into being." What we see here in Genesis is a dialogue. The call produces a response to God's life-giving action. "The earth germinates, but it does not sprout that which it has but transforms that which it does not have, as much as God gives the strength to act," wrote St. Basil the Great. The seeds of life are not found in the earth; rather, "God's word creates beings" and plants these in earth, which, in turn, germinates them. Earth is unable to be fertile by itself, yet there is no reason to downplay its role: "Let the earth bring forth by itself without having any need of help from without." While life proceeds from earth, the very life-giving ability of matter is a gift of the Creator.”

“On the other hand, unprejudiced reading of Scripture makes one notice a certain degree of activity that created matter has. It is not written that "God created grass," but, "Let the earth bring forth grass." Later on, God is depicted not as simply creating life out of nothing but as calling on waters so that they may "bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life."

“The emergence of life in the Book of Genesis is both evolutionary (as earth is producing plants and simple organisms), and also a "leap towards life," occurring by the order of God.”

“God calls the Earth to a synergy, to a creativity that is indicative of the God-given internal creative abilities of the Earth. Different stages in the history of Creation open with God's call upon "earth." The world, being called to growth and development, acts in cooperation with God. This theme of cooperation of God and His creation appears in the Bible long before the creation of man. The fact that the earth in response to the Word is producing life indicates that it is not merely a lifeless substance, out of which an external action is "moulding life," overcoming inert matter. The Bible is unlike the Vedanta, and matter in it is not a synonym of death and non-being.

This is how St. Basil is describing this creative response in his Homily V: "See how, at this short word, at this brief command, the cold and sterile earth travailed and hastened to bring forth its fruit, as it casts away its sad and dismal covering to clothe itself in a more brilliant robe, proud of its proper adornment and displaying the infinite variety of plants."

Could there be a clearer indication of the compatibility of a truly Christian understanding of creation and the task of science? Yet how can it be that some Christians, in this case the Orthodox, can speak in such positive terms about evolution and others, self-styled creationists, find this so difficult? A possible answer to this question lies in the manner of theologizing, even the faith itself. Speaking personally I do often wonder if we have more to celebrate and share as Orthodox Christians with agnostic scientists than with the militant fundamentalists who now as so often before bring our faith into disrepute ... as they also once did in the time St. Augustine! Perhaps we may also hope that in this dialogue Orthodox theological reflection on the wonders of creation will be deepened and refined by the insights of contemporary science. We have all got some catching up to do!