

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 26 | Issue 5

Article 9

12-1-2009

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Recommended Citation

Zheltov, Fr. Mikhail (2009) "Theological and Scientific Aspects of the Unity of Mankind," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 5 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol26/iss5/9>

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THEOLOGICAL AND SCIENTIFIC ASPECTS OF THE UNITY OF MANKIND

Fr. Mikhail Zheltov

The idea of the genetic unity of all mankind is an integral part of Christian teaching. The purpose of this brief survey is to illustrate its role within the Greek patristic tradition, and then to point to a few examples from modern science which lend support to this ancient idea.

1. *Biblical Thought*

The idea of the unity of all mankind is expressed already in the Bible. It appears vividly, for example, in the story of the creation of Eve from Adam's rib (Gen 2:18–24) and the following statement that Eve was "the mother of all living" (Gen 3:20). One also recalls how important for the Old Testament writers are genealogies tracing from Adam the descent of the nations of the earth (and similar genealogies also found their way into the New Testament, in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke).

In the New Testament the idea of the genetic unity of mankind acquires a crucial soteriological and Christological meaning:

As through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin; and so death passed unto all men, [for that] in him (*eph' hōi*) all sinned¹ For if, by the trespass of the one, death reigned through the one; much more shall they that receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one, even Jesus Christ. (Rom. 5:12, 17)

In patristic tradition this teaching of the apostle Paul was developed further; for example, the sixty-ninth chapter of the "Second Oration against the Arians" of St. Athanasius of Alexandria is actually an expanded paraphrase of these verses from the Epistle to the Romans.²

2. *Patristic Developments*

The idea of the universality and unity of the nature of mankind was absolutely natural for the Church Fathers, not only because of its Biblical background but also because it could be taken as compatible either with Plato's world of ideas or Aristotle's thinking on first and second substanc-

¹It should be noted that this famous verse can be translated differently—without "in him."

²And note that it follows the sense of the translation of Rom 5:12 given in the main text, and not in note 1 (see PG. 26. 293).



es. The Fathers of the fourth century readily affirm that all humans share one common nature, and that this nature can be compared with a real being of some sort. So, for example, St. Gregory of Nyssa writes:

Since, then, there was needed a lifting up from death for the whole of our nature, He [i.e., Christ] stretches forth a hand as it were to prostrate man, and stooping down to our dead corpse, He came so far within the grasp of death as to touch a state of deadness, and then in His own body to bestow on our nature the principle of the resurrection, raising as He did by His power along with Himself the whole man. For since from no other source than from the concrete lump of our nature had come that flesh, which was the receptacle of the Godhead and in the Resurrection was raised up together with that Godhead, therefore just in the same way as, in the instance of this body of ours, the operation of one of the organs of sense is felt at once by the whole system, as one with that member, so also the Resurrection principle of this Member, as though the whole nature [of mankind] were a single living being (*kathaper henos ontos zōiou pasēs tēs physeōs*), passes through the entire race, being imparted from the Member to the whole by virtue of the continuity and oneness of the nature (*kata to suneches te kai hēnomenon tēs phuseōs*).³

For the Fathers of the fourth century, the theme of the universality of nature of all mankind was not a disputable matter. This may have been due in part to the spirit of the epoch, when—within the framework of Trinitarian controversies of the period—development of proofs of the consubstantiality of the Divine hypostases was the main task for the most outstanding theologians (although the notion of Divine consubstantiality is not identical to the idea we discuss here). The picture remained the same in the beginning of the fifth century, so that it was quite natural that St. Cyril of Alexandria in his exegesis returns to this theme again and again. For example, he writes:

We are in no way different in our nature from our offspring, nor are we sundered from them in an alienation of nature, although we are distinguished by a difference of outward personality; in illustration of which, let any man who has looked upon the son begotten by himself consider the history of the blessed Abraham. But in the case of men the difference is often very considerable, each one tending definitely, in a way, towards a retirement and withdrawal of himself into a peculiar line of life and manners, without feeling personally bound up in the other; although their unity of essence is certain and evident to all. . . . For how can distinction exist in the unity (with reference to which each individual has some special characteristic)? For Peter is Peter, and not Paul, and Paul is not Peter; yet they remain without distinction in their nature. For both possess one kind of nature, and the individuals who are associated in a unity of nature have that same kind without any difference at all. . . . We believe that it was to secure the benefits for all the nature [of mankind], through Himself and in Himself first as in the first fruits of humanity, that the Only-begotten has become like us.⁴

³Gregory of Nyssa, *The Great Catechism* 32.4 (PG. 45. 78–80).

⁴Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John* IX.1 (PG. 74. 216, 237, 276).

But after St. Cyril's time, when theological discussion for long focused on the Christological debates, the universality of the nature of all mankind turned out to be problematic. The idea of universal natures in general, and of the unity of the nature of mankind in particular, was doubted most radically by John Philoponus, a sixth-century scholar and monophysite theologian. In his theological thought Philoponus began to use the term "particular nature" (*merikē phusis*) widely. Philoponus's really existing "particular natures" were opposed to universal natures, which he took to be abstract. In other words, in Philoponus's view one can speak of real existence only of concrete instances of this or that universal nature, whereas the latter is only a virtual generalization. This position had crucial consequences for Christological and soteriological aspects of Christian teaching—for example, it meant that in His incarnation Christ accepted only His own "particular nature," not a common nature of all humankind.

The answer to John Philoponus was given by his contemporary, Leontius of Byzantium. Leontius denied Philoponus's "particular natures," asserting the real existence of universal natures, and introduced in his late treatise named "Epilyseis" the idea of an "individual" (*en tōi atomōi*) nature as a collection of a universal nature plus individual features, both having real existence.⁵ There was also around this time (in the sixth or seventh century) another famous Leontius, Leontius of Jerusalem, but his position on this question is disputed: while some authors⁶ call his position "nominalistic," others interpret it in a quite opposite way.⁷ St. Maximus the Confessor, the most important Byzantine theologian of the seventh century, seems to have believed in the real existence of universal natures; in any case, his teaching on the *logoi* of things created naturally has that implication.⁸

However that may be, in the eighth century St. John of Damascus, the author of the greatest summa of all Greek pre-iconoclastic Orthodox theology, completely rejected Philoponus's idea of "particular natures" and affirmed the reality of universal natures, including the real existence of

⁵This is, at least, the interpretation of Richard Cross, "Individual Natures in the Christology of Leontius of Byzantium," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10 (2002), pp. 245–265. It should be noted, however, that a Russian scholar, Basil Louriè, believes that Leontius actually did accept Philoponus's concept of "particular natures"; see his Лурье, *История византийской философии: формативный период* (St. Petersburg, 2006), pp. 331–346. Yet Louriè's interpretation is based for the most part not on quotations from the sources and their analysis, but on a long series of hypotheses and syllogisms, and Louriè does not even bother to refute the arguments of Cross, only stating that Cross "does not even notice the complicated system which Leontius of Byzantium has developed as a basis for his concept of a potential (noumenal) existence of particular natures" (*ibid.*, pp. 524–525), giving no further explanation of this strong statement. Therefore, the interpretation of Cross, based on the source texts, seems more reliable.

⁶For example, R. Cross, "Individual Natures."

⁷For example, B. Louriè, Лурье, *История византийской философии*, who writes that Leontius of Jerusalem was directing his efforts to the "transformation of the notion of Leontius of Byzantium and Eutychius [of Constantinople] about the real existence of the 'particular nature' into a purely intellectual abstraction" (p. 520).

⁸See J.-C. Larchet, *La divinisation de l'homme selon Saint Maxime le Confesseur* (Paris, 1996), pp. 365–374.

a common nature of all mankind.⁹ (He did not thereby exclude the reality of individual natures as well; here he probably followed Leonitus of Byzantium.)¹⁰ Thus he writes:

Nature is perceived either as [1] a matter of pure thought only (for it has no independent existence), or as [2] that what is common in all hypostases of the same species, being their bond of union, and is [then] spoken of as nature viewed in species, or it is [perceived] [3] in a single hypostasis completely, [but] with the addition of accidents, and is spoken of as nature viewed in an individual, remaining identical with nature viewed in species. Therefore, God the Word, becoming incarnate, did not assume [1] the nature that is regarded as an abstraction in pure thought (for such a thing would not have been incarnation, but only an imposture and a figment of incarnation), nor [2] the nature perceived in species (for He did not assume the hypostases of all [humans altogether]), but [3] the nature perceived in an individual, which is identical with that viewed in species (for He took on Himself the first-fruit of our compound [nature]—i. e., not a [nature] which first has an independent existence and which had already formed an individual when it was assumed by Him, but a [nature] which took its existence in his hypostasis). For the hypostasis of God the Word in itself became the hypostasis for the flesh, and in this very sense “the Word became flesh,” clearly without any change, and likewise the flesh became Word without alteration, and God [became] man. . . . And so it is the same to say either “the nature of the Word” or “the nature in the individual.” For this signifies strictly and exclusively neither the individual, that is, the hypostasis, nor the commonality of the hypostases, but the common nature which is perceived and discerned as viewed and presented in one of the hypostases.¹¹

In the centuries to follow, the Orthodox East knew of no debates on the real existence of universal natures which could be compared with the medieval controversy on universalia in the Latin West.

Thus, for an Orthodox theologian for whom the authority of the Church Fathers is indisputable, the real existence of universal natures is not a matter of negation or neglect. Yet what should be the interpretation of this in the modern philosophical and cultural context, where the names of Plato and Aristotle, although held in respect, are not authorities as obvious as they were for the Byzantine authors,¹² and where the ontological systems of Antiquity are only a particular case of a wider spectrum of opinions? Perhaps one can get some help from the natural sciences here—especially

⁹See his treatise “Concerning Heresy,” chap. 83, in B. Kotter, *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, vol. 4 (Berlin and New York, 1981), pp. 49–50.

¹⁰See Richard Cross, “Perichoresis, Deification and Christological Predication in John of Damascus,” *Mediaeval Studies* 62 (2000), pp. 69–124.

¹¹John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, chap. 55; Kotter, *Die Schriften*, vol. 4, pp. 131–132. The numbering is mine.

¹²One should note, though, that from the Byzantine point of view the universal natures of all things were by no means equivalent to the Platonic “Ideas.” The Platonic teaching on the “world of Ideas” is explicitly rejected and condemned in the Synodikon of Orthodoxy, read in Byzantine churches each year; see Jean Gouillard, *Le Synodikon de l’Orthodoxie: Édition et commentaire* (Paris, 1967: Travaux et mémoires 2), p. 59.

since the physical aspect of the universality and unity of mankind is even less obvious than the spiritual one.

3. *Scientific Aspects*

The most important observation to make for our purposes is the fact that, from a biological point of view, the human body is a result of the fission of a unique cell, which, in its turn, is a product of the confluence of two parents' cells, a male and a female. Now, can one say that after the confluence these two cells have ceased to exist—or have they just been transformed into some new state? In any case, the organic life of a human body, which is in fact the lives of its cells, is an indissoluble continuation of the lives of the parents' bodies, so that the physical (at least) part of human nature could be described indeed as a "single living being" (using the expression of St. Gregory of Nyssa), which springs from the bodies of the first people and is steadily growing in time and in space.

In the very heart of the process of cellular fission is a molecule of DNA. It is this very molecule (together with the RNA and, possibly, some other secondary mechanisms still unstudied) which is the data record responsible for the construction and growth of the human body as a whole. It is this data, in the end, which makes the cells to function, split, and grow, using the atoms and molecules which have been already discussed earlier. Like the cells themselves, their DNA represents an indissoluble continuation of the process of their replication, which began with the first people; and the DNA molecules of all mankind are still compatible with each other. (Compatibility means here that theoretically any pair of a man and woman in good health, despite individual differences, could give birth to a common child.) Therefore, the information contained in DNA and other cellular mechanisms provides an informational field which is responsible for the existence of the bodily part of human nature as a whole, and, one could say, is a bridge between its purely material and informational unity.

Finally, one should also recall the achievements of analytical psychology, with its "archetypes" of the "collective unconscious," which could be used to promote the idea of informational unity of mankind further.

Of course, the listed examples have very little to do with ancient Greek philosophy and, therefore, do not 'prove' those patristic lines of thought which were based on its apparatus. Yet they could serve as an attempt to show to a contemporary audience that the ancient Christian thought on this matter is by no means outdated or ridiculous.

However that may be, a real religious experience of communion and unity of people with each other and with Christ can be gained in the Church—above all, during a Eucharistic celebration. That is what Apostle Paul meant in writing:

For we are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones. (Eph 5:30)