

**The Rose and the Stag.
An American Orthodox
Conversation on Modernity,
Science, and Biblical
Interpretation**

Almagest

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Abstract

Though the Orthodox in America remain a small minority, two figures –the monk Seraphim Rose and the theologian David Bentley Hart– have nevertheless exerted great influence on Christianity both within and without the United States. In comparing these two figures, the multifarious perspectives of American Orthodox on science, theology, and biblical hermeneutics can be seen up close. Though, at first, Rose and Hart may seem at first to have little in common, they agree on one foundational issue: that modernity is essentially nihilistic and is the result of the world’s inexorable slide away from Christianity into “nothingness.” However, while they share this diagnosis of what ails the modern world, they differ wildly in their solution to it, illustrating how wide the chasm can truly be between two members of the same church. Rose was deeply hostile to ecumenism and evolutionary biology, finding refuge in a creationism he thought backed by the Church Fathers. Conversely, Hart argues there is only hope in ecumenical unity, and he rejects creationism and Intelligent Design, arguing instead for the classical doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, an understanding of the natural world as intrinsically teleological, and a biblical hermeneutic based not on literalism but reading *ad litteram*.

The beaches of San Diego, California—studded with surfers, aircraft carriers, and the sunset silhouette of the Hotel del Coronado—may be the last place one would associate with the rigorous asceticism of Orthodox monastics, but that is precisely from where one of the 20th century’s most noteworthy American Orthodox monks heralded. Born in 1934 in San Diego, Eugene Rose (later Seraphim) was known for both for his intellectual pursuits (ranging from analysis of modernity, patristics, and eschatology) and his rigorous asceticism. A convert as an adult, he is still lionized by his followers, especially his friend and student Hieromonk Damascene Christensen. David Bentley Hart, on the other hand, is from the opposite end of the country—Maryland—but is likewise a convert to Orthodoxy, coming from an Anglican background (Micheli 2016). Starting with his virtuosic 2003 work of theology *The Beauty of the Infinite*, Hart has cast a large shadow over the academic theological world, and has worn various hats as a polemical defender of Christianity against atheism, a proponent of classical theism, a prolific essayist, a fiction writer, a translator, and (most important) a “damnably idolatrous” Baltimore Orioles fan (Hart 2017a, 110). Stanley Hauerwas once remarked that when he taught a graduate course at the University of Virginia, he had “a student in the class who knew more than I did. His name was David Hart” (Hauerwas 2012, 197).

These two figures—despite such different backgrounds—show just how distinct the voices within American Orthodoxy are, and how different their respective answers can be to the more pressing questions (of science, ecumenism, and biblical interpretation) raised to Orthodoxy by modernity. However, though their personality, background, and theological outlook are quite different, Hart and Rose have a few things in common. Both have evinced an interest in Asian religions, and though Rose ultimately moved far away from his early dalliances with Zen (Christensen 2009), Hart continues to draw on figures like Ramanuja and Dogen in his writing. In addition, both share a defensiveness of Augustine against his abuses by the 20th century theologians of the neo-patristic synthesis, with Rose defending the Bishop of Hippo in *The Place of Blessed Augustine in the Orthodox Church*, and Hart condemning John Romanides’s writings on Augustine as “almost miraculously devoid of one single correct statement” (Hart 2017b, 273). Beyond these issues, their chief point of agreement is their association of modernity with nihilism. Though they share this diagnosis of modernity, however, they differ wildly in terms of prescription. In response to nihilism of modernity, Rose sought refuge in an increasingly isolated Orthodox faith and opposed ecumenism as a modernist heresy, and he later advocated for a rejection of evolutionary biology in favor of creationism. Hart, on the other hand, promotes instead ecumenical unity and the importance of *creatio ex nihilo*, a doctrine not only compatible with contemporary science but also an alternative to the nihilistic wasteland of modern life.

Rose’s most scholarly-minded work—*Nihilism: The Root of the Revolution of the Modern Age*—is a bristling attack on the moral genealogy of modernity that reads almost like Nietzsche in reverse. In fact, Rose used Nietzsche as the start of his investigation, taking the latter’s definition of nihilism whole (“that there is *no truth*; that there is no absolute state of affairs—no

“thing-in-itself”) and wrote that “this alone is Nihilism” (Rose 2001, 12). Though nihilism has, as its source, this revolutionary rejection of God, it nevertheless manifests in four different forms in the modern world: liberalism, realism, vitalism, and then, finally, destruction. His clearest chapter is on liberalism, where Rose’s central contention is that, though it is a rather genial form of nihilism, liberalism is nevertheless nihilistic in that it cannot offer a justification for its own existence. Eventually, despite its apparent triumph in the 20th century, it will be whittled away into nothingness – compromise by compromise – because its vision is one of only negative liberty, and so therefore it will be unable to counter “critical truth” with any alternative positive vision of the good or of even mere political order (Rose 2001, 33). Hart, in his own take on political theory, makes a similar diagnosis, describing the “negative liberty” of modern liberalism as a “soporific nihilism” (Hart 2017b, 323).

For Rose, modernity is ultimately the Nietzschean return to the original nothingness before existence. God called creation out of nothing – *ex nihilo* – and the subsequent denial of God by modern humanity has returned humanity to the nothingness out of which they were drawn. “No man [...] lives without a god”, wrote Rose, “who then –or what– is the god of the Nihilist? It is *nihil*, nothingness itself” (Rose 2001, 68-70). Modernity is a river resulting from the fount of nothingness – its tributaries forking off into Darwinism, communism, Dadaism, liberalism, humanism, etc. For Rose, the “simplistic” nihilist viewpoint is evident in “the universal prestige today accorded the lowest order of knowledge, the scientific, as well as the simplistic ideas of men like Marx, Freud, and Darwin, which underlie virtually the whole of contemporary thought and life” (Rose 2001, 38). It was Rose’s zealous rejection of evolutionary biology as anti-Christian modernism, incompatible with the faith bequeathed unto the church by the Fathers, that has become his most lasting legacy.

David Bentley Hart’s understanding of modernity coincides a great deal with Rose’s, though his is buttressed by more engagement with scholarly sources and a more nuanced understanding of Nietzsche. Put most trenchantly in his essay “Christ and Nothing”, Hart writes that “as modern men and women –to the degree that we are modern– we believe in nothing”. In a flourish that Rose would certainly agree with, he continues, “This is not to say [...] that we do not believe in anything; I mean, rather, that we hold an unshakable, if often unconscious, faith in the nothing, or in nothingness as such”. Nothing, in Hart’s view, is the true idol that is implicit in the commandment “thou shalt have no other gods before me”. Without God in the picture, modern people spiral into a nihilism oriented entirely around the capricious and self-directed will. “At the end of modernity”, he writes, “each of us who is true to the times stands facing not God, or the gods, or the Good beyond beings, but an abyss, over which presides the empty, inviolable authority of the individual will” (Hart 2009b, 1-2). This conception results in a rather debased understanding of freedom as simply the volitional will bounded only by “negative liberty”, and therefore is the aforementioned “soporific nihilism”. The will, coronated as the sovereign over human life, manifests as an acquisitive, capitalist frenzy that masks the vast chasm of nothingness lurking beneath contemporary society like an open maw. The transformation of the will –of “liberty” into “license” – is what it truly

means to be modern, informing as it does even our religious sensibilities. "Our religion", he writes, "is one of comfortable nihilism" (Hart 2009b, 3).

Though Hart understands modernity as essentially nihilistic, his interpretation of its genealogy in history departs from Rose. "The word 'nihilism' has a complex history in modern philosophy", he writes, "but I use it in a sense largely determined by Nietzsche and Heidegger, both of whom not only diagnosed modernity as nihilism, but saw Christianity as complicit in its genesis" (Hart 2009b, 5). For Heidegger, according to Hart, modernity is a time of "realized nihilism, the age in which the will to power has become the ground of all our values". It is in the present modern age that humanity has forgotten the mystery of being, or of the difference between beings and being as such (Hart 2016, 93). Rather than laying the blame entirely on the early modern world for the development of nihilism, Hart acknowledges that both Heidegger and Nietzsche "traced the philosophical origins of nihilism back to ancient Athens"; though, for Heidegger, this was done without the "rancor" and "metaphysical thinking" of Nietzsche (Hart 2016, 95). This germ of ancient nihilism was not realized in that era, however, because of the irruption into the late antique world of a new religion: Christianity, a faith that completely upended the social order and transfigured philosophy. "Christian thought [...] did not occur as just another episode in the genealogy of nihilism", writes Hart:

"it was so profound a disruption of many of the most basic premises of philosophy, and so audacious a rescue of many of philosophy's truths from the impotent embrace of mere metaphysical ambition, that it is doubtful yet that philosophy understands what happened to it, or why now it cannot be anything but an ever more self-tormenting denial of that interruption". (Hart 2003, 130)

The scale and scope of the Christian interruption was so pervasive that it drew nearly every philosophical category into itself. "Theology is part of the history of nihilism", contends Hart, "it leaves nothing good behind in the philosopher's hands; it plunders all of philosophy's most powerful interpretive instruments for its own uses" (Hart 2017b, 27). Deprived of any of its philosophical tools, and left, indeed, with "nothing", we can then understand Christianity as "the midwife of nihilism, not because it is itself nihilistic, but because it is too powerful in its embrace of the world and all of the world's mystery and beauty; and so to reject Christianity now is, of necessity, to reject everything except the barren anonymity of spontaneous subjectivity" (Hart 2009b, 13). All of this means that, when it comes to gods to whom moderns must submit themselves, there is only a binary option: Christ or nothing.

And so, while Rose and Hart view modernity as being nihilistic at its core, they nevertheless understand that nihilism differently, and even more crucially, they seek to resist this nihilism in antithetical ways. Whereas Rose thought ecumenism a threat to the Church, Hart sees in it the Church's salvation. In one of his shorter, more whimsical pieces entitled "The Abbot and Aunt Susie", Hart takes issue with an Orthodox monk who was asked by Matthew Milliner if holiness was "possible outside the Orthodox Church". The abbot replied, "A measure of

virtue perhaps, but holiness is not possible" (Milliner 2010). Hart takes umbrage with the comment, writing:

"When some hoary-headed old mammal in monastic garb starts spouting nonsense of this sort, no matter how offensive we find it, we're supposed to shrug patiently and smile a gently ironic smile, reminding ourselves that a dash of curmudgeonly sectarian insularity is frequently the inevitable concomitant of deep piety. But I don't want to play along". (Hart 2016, 76)

Moreover, this is "not the *official* teaching of the Orthodox Church (so few things are), and most Orthodox Christians would tend to regard it as the embarrassingly silly twaddle that it is; but is something that certain hardliners like to say" (Hart 2016, 77).

Rose, for his part, did say similar things. In his apocalyptic, and at times deeply paranoid, *Orthodoxy and the Religion of the Future*, he lamented the development of Christian ecumenism, expressing "bewilderment" at the willingness of Orthodox academics to sign joint declarations with "heterodox Christians", and asking with rhetorical anger, "Is there no limit to the betrayal, the denaturation, the self-liquidation of Orthodoxy?". All of Christian ecumenism is, for Rose, driven by an engine of heresy, one already denounced, but nevertheless persistent, and which will "only end in a syncretic world religion" (Rose 1997). In response, Hart describes the simple and undeniable piety of a woman he knew when he was a child, whom he called Aunt Susie, and who "probably never even set foot in an Orthodox church" (Hart 2016, 76-77). Respect for other traditions is not just a matter of good manners, either; Hart writes that ecumenism is truly needed to sustain the Church as it diminishes in the face of ascendant modernity. Elsewhere, he laments that "I often suffer from bleak premonitions of the ultimate cultural triumph in the West of a consumerism so devoid of transcendent values as to be, inevitably, nothing but a pervasive and pitiless nihilism". In the face of this seemingly indefatigable engine of nothingness, Christianity's only defenses are "evangelical zeal and internal unity". He hopes that the Orthodox Church's insulation from "the more corrosive pathologies of modernity" may have some divine purpose, something it can now offer to Christians in the West, and that "we are more in need of one another now than ever". At the end of the day, internecine squabbling and historical bitterness aside, "I do not think that we will walk very far in the light hereafter except together" (Hart 2017b, 284). Hart and Rose stand at the opposite end of a divide when it comes to ecumenism. Rose worried for the "state of the souls" of those who would engage in such an enterprise, and Hart condemns the "hardliners" as lacking all charity. Ecumenism, though, is not the furthest point of disagreement, for it is on the question of creation that Hart and Rose depart even more sharply, even though each ultimately see creation as the way to strike back against the nihilism of modernity.

For the last nine years of his life, Rose worked on a compilation of writings that he believed definitively showed that the Church Fathers made no room for anything hospitable to

evolutionary biology. He died before publishing it, but his student and friend Hieromonk Damascene Christensen assembled and released the mammoth work in 2000 – *Genesis, Creation, and Early Man* – under Rose’s name. The subtitle of the book indicates the confidence with which Rose and Christensen approached their argument – as critical reviewers George and Elizabeth Theokritoff note, it reads “*The Orthodox Christian Vision*,” not “*An Orthodox Christian Vision*” (Theokritoff 2002, 367). For Rose, the Church Fathers were the “missing evidence” concerning human origins and the creation of the universe. It was through them that truth about origins could be learned, and so he sought not only to catalogue their writings on the matter, but, in following Florovsky’s famous phrase, to “acquire the patristic mind” (Christensen 2011, 29-31).

For Rose, theistic evolution was more dangerous than the skeptics outside the church, and its adherents posed a mortal threat to Orthodoxy. As Christensen documents, “Father Seraphim understood that his battle was not so much with atheistic physical evolution and its absurdities as with the allegedly more ‘refined’ forms of theistic or spiritual evolution. The latter, he said, ‘are not at all more “refined”, just more vague and confused!’”. For Rose, evolution was simply one part of the entire modern apparatus – a hideous hypertrophy of the Enlightenment worldview that had emerged in near total opposition to Orthodox Christianity. “We fully agree”, he quoted a sympathizer, “evolution is one of the most dangerous concepts that faces Orthodox Christians today”. As such, any Orthodox believer could not hold to evolution without committing ideological suicide. “Physical evolution is *by its nature atheistic*”, he wrote, “and it’s only ridiculous when ‘theologians’ run after the latest ‘scientific’ theory in order not to be left behind the times”. It was therefore impossible, in his view, to be Orthodox and to affirm evolutionary biology, and those who did so were submitting to the wisdom of “the times”. The only reason this sort of dual-viewpoint manifested at all was because “the Patristic illiteracy of our day [...] is so great that any ‘theologian’ can say virtually anything and attribute it to a ‘Holy Father’ and not be corrected”. It was to correct this flawed, modernist reading of the Church Fathers that Rose waded into the debate about theology and evolution (Christensen 1993, 515-516).

“In the Holy Fathers we find the ‘mind of the Church’”, wrote Rose, “the living understanding of God’s revelation. They are our link between the ancient texts which contain God’s revelation and today’s reality” (Rose 2011, 112). The Fathers are the hermeneutical key to understanding creation, and Christians must default to them. Furthermore, the Fathers offer a perspective on Genesis that is unanimously creationist. For this reason, Rose grew frustrated with Orthodox theologians and clergy who favored “allegorical readings” of *Genesis* (and who used the Fathers to justify it). “If there are symbolic or figurative elements”, he wrote, “in the Genesis narrative of the Garden of Eden, we easily jump to the conclusion that the whole narrative is a ‘symbol’ or ‘allegory’”. This move is not permitted, wrote Rose, and to rebut the theistic evolutionist perspective he appealed to several damning passages from the Fathers. He cited Basil of Caesarea:

"Those who do not admit the common meaning of the Scriptures say that water is not water, but some other nature, and they explain a plant and a fish according to their opinion [...] [But] when I hear 'grass' I think of grass, and in the same manner I understand everything as it is said, a plant, a fish, a wild animal, and an ox".

Next, Ephrem the Syrian: "No one should think that the Creation of Six Days is an allegory". Lastly, John Chrysostom:

"Perhaps those who love to speak from their own wisdom here also will not allow that the rivers are actually rivers, nor that the waters are precisely waters, but will instill [...] the idea that they (under the names of rivers and waters) represented something else". These quotations show, for Rose, that the Fathers were "quite 'literal' in their interpretation of the text, even while, in many cases, allowing also a symbolic or mystical meaning". (Rose 2011, 119-122)

"Any reasonably objective observer", continued Rose, "would have to conclude that the Six Days of Creation [...] simply do not fit into the evolutionary framework". Evolutionary history is incompatible with creation, in Rose's view, and creation is a real historical event. "We should approach the early chapters of Genesis as we would a book of prophecy", wrote Rose, "knowing that it is actual events being described". What's more, these events are essentially beyond the reach of scientific investigation, because "no scientific theory can tell us about those Six Days. Science tries to explain [...] the changes of this world, based on projections of natural processes which can be observed today. But the Six Days of Creation are *not* a natural process; they are what came *before* all the world's natural processes began to work" (Rose 2011, 131). Rose rejected the uniformitarian and gradualist approach to understanding the world's geological and biological history, and he substituted the Fathers as the interpretative framework to unlock this black box of creation history. He also condemned the enterprise of science itself, writing that science has its source in the nihilistic drive for power. In an almost Foucauldian flourish, he said, "Modern science has given itself totally to *power*. Even 'curiosity,' the root of modern science, aims at power, for the objective knowledge arrived at through curiosity is one in which 'facts' are seen to be at one's mercy" (Christensen 1993, 132).

In writing to his reader, Rose stated, "You will note that I quoted Holy Fathers who interpret the text of Genesis in a way that might be called rather 'literal'". Conscious of the apparent modernism in this move, he attempted to distinguish it from the kind of literalism associated with 20th century American fundamentalism, writing, "Some people are so concerned to combat Protestant fundamentalism that they go to extreme lengths to refute anyone who wishes to interpret the sacred text of Genesis 'literally'; but in doing so they never refer to St. Basil or other commentators". This is an error, because "we must interpret [the Bible] as the Holy Fathers teach us". What do the Fathers teach? For Rose, it was as simple as Basil himself said it: "Therefore, let it [Genesis] be understood as it has been written" (Rose 2011, 433-434). To do otherwise is to succumb to the modern

embarrassment of patristic teaching. However, in an irony made possible by his proximity to that hyper-modern bastion of American Christianity that is Southern California, Rose made extensive use of one of the most modernist, rationalist Christian movements in the world to support his views: the young-earth creationists of the Institute for Creation Research (ICR) in San Diego.

Despite his castigation of Protestant fundamentalists as poorly informed on patristic writings, he nevertheless warmly embraced their attacks on evolution. When impugned for his opposition to contemporary science, Rose made recourse to the ICR to justify his position. In a controversy with the Greek doctor and theistic evolutionist Alexandros Kalomiros, Rose volleyed accusations of scientific ignorance back at him. "You seem to be unaware of the great mass of *scientific literature* in recent years which is highly critical of the evolutionary theory", he wrote. "I could indeed", he boasted, "compile a list of *hundreds* (if not *thousands*) of reputable scientists who now either disbelieve in evolution entirely or state that it is highly questionable scientific theory" (Christensen 1993, 520). Elsewhere, Rose wrote, "If someone tells you that evolution is the only scientific interpretation, you should be aware that there are at least six hundred scientists who say no". Though the ICR is not Orthodox, "these people are very good. Their Institute is a Protestant religious school, but they are operating purely on the basis of scientific criticism" (Rose 2011, 680-682). The ICR, according to Rose, "is very good because they do not try to push the Bible; they have books (like *Scientific Creationism*) that present material purely from the scientific point of view" (Rose 2011, 379). In fact, he viewed the ICR's creation science as a kind of Kuhnian paradigm shift that would eventually supplant evolutionary theory as a "simpler" model (Rose 2011, 683). Ultimately, despite his embrace of young-earth creationism, Rose felt that the patristic argument was strong enough on its own, and he largely eschewed interacting with the science of evolution on its own terms.

Rose's argument—employing the Fathers as a rebuttal to not only evolution as a scientific theory, but also against the Christian philosophical alternative of theistic evolution—seems, in retrospect, to be rather prescient. What began as a fringe exercise (Rose was, after all, an ascetic living in a remote part of California, with very little connection to the greater academic world) subsequently expanded around the globe. Rose's star has risen even in Europe—particularly in Russia and in Greece—demonstrating that his appeal ranges beyond traditionalist American Orthodox. "Until fairly recently", notes historian Ronald Numbers, "the notion of a history of creationism in Europe would have struck many readers as preposterous" (Numbers 2014, vii). Creationism is usually associated not only with America, but provincial America at that: southern and southwestern, creationism is the product of sunbelt lands stretching from Alabama to Southern California—states awash with conservative Protestantism, right-wing politics, and evangelical zeal. While these places may form the bulwark of creationist communities, the ideology has nevertheless spread across the globe, and Rose's ideas on patristic authority, and his rejection of modernity, have found fertile ground.

During his life, Rose was a dedicated Russophile. In a lecture given in 1981, shortly before his death, Rose waxed prophetically about Russia's role in the end of history. "But ironically – and providentially", stated Rose, "as Orthodoxy has seemed to retreat, Russia [...] has advanced and now has a leading, perhaps the leading position in the world history of our times" (Rose 2010). For their part, many Russian Orthodox have repaid Rose with attention exceeding most other countries. As Damascene Christensen said in an interview, "Fr. Seraphim was in the Russian Church [...]. And now we know that ROCOR is in communion with the Moscow Patriarchate, and Fr. Seraphim has as much veneration in Russia, in fact maybe more so than anywhere else" (Allen 2007). Rose's affection for Russia has been repaid with an interest there in his brand of creationism. Initially, "Scientific creationism [...] came to Russia in the form of translations of texts written by Western Protestant creationists and members of the intelligent design movement". However, Russian Orthodox creationism took on a different tone from its Western protestant counterpart and is "relatively autonomous in relation to transnational creationist movements". The reason for this is because "polemics within the Orthodox tradition are primarily based on statements of the Holy Fathers and proceed on a purely theological level". The consequence is that scientific creationism has less sway than arguments like the patristic ones that Rose proffers. It is fitting, then, that "Russian-speaking Orthodox creationists have borrowed their theological arguments to a significant extent from the writings of the American Hieromonk Seraphim Rose" (Levit, Levit, Hossfeld, and Olsen 2014, 176-177).

Rose's lasting influence is not restricted only to Russia. After all, according to Christensen, he is "already called [...] St. Seraphim in Serbia", and "now he's being venerated in Greece" (Allen 2007). As noted by Efthymios Nicolaidis, "the monk Seraphim Rose has also played a role in Greek theology's interpretation of evolution" (Nicolaidis 2014, 156). Rose himself took great interest in Greek Orthodox responses to modern science, and he singled out Alexandros Kalomiros with particular force, authoring several polemical treatises in order to refute Kalomiros's fusion of traditionalist Orthodoxy with evolution (Rose 2011, 624-629). The anti-western bent in his writing led Rose to consider evolution "even worse than heresy" and as evidence of the dangers of ecumenical outreach. As he wrote, "Evolution is not just all that is wrong with Western society; it is all that is wrong with Western Christianity, a soft and corrupted form of Christianity invented by the devil to lure true Christians away from the right path" (Nicolaidis 2014, 156).

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While Rose sought to rescue Christianity from the trappings of evolutionary biology by looking either to the ancient past or to nations beyond the borders of his own (particularly Russia), others within the United States took up his ideas –his deployment of the Church Fathers, his association of evolution with modernism, and his understanding of modernity as corrosive nihilism– in order to renew the country from within. Of paramount importance here is the contemporary Intelligent Design movement. Though ID gained prominence after

Rose's death, several of its leaders have made use not only of his patristic strategies and his strident anti-modernism but have even drawn from Rose himself. One of the most surprising things about Seraphim Rose's *Genesis, Creation, and Early Man* is that the introduction was written by Phillip Johnson, a law professor from the University of California, Berkeley, who is, for all intents and purposes, the founder of Intelligent Design. Rose and Johnson appear to be strange bedfellows, as Intelligent Design advocates have long tried to distance themselves from the kind of creationism that Rose espoused, but Johnson nevertheless professes deep admiration for Rose, lauding both the ascetic's devotion to the patristic writings on creation as well as his attacks on modernity. Calling Rose a "character straight out of the days of the desert Fathers", Johnson notes that "I have rarely encountered so penetrating an intellect combined with so generous a spirit". He deflects criticism that thinkers such as Rose reflect a "dark age" mindset, writing that "Father Seraphim would have been proud to admit that he was trying to recapture the mindset of the early Christian centuries". It was Rose's anti-modernist writings that first appealed to Johnson – he first discovered Rose when he encountered the ascetic's polemic *Nihilism* and found it engrossing. It was after reading *Nihilism* that he agreed to compose the introduction to *Genesis, Creation, and Early Man* (Johnson 1998, 175-176).

The greatest point of harmony between Rose and Johnson is their hostility to the innate naturalism that they both view as integral to modern scientific enterprise. Johnson admits that he comes at the project from a different vantage than Rose, as he writes for a more secular audience. "Most of my critics", he writes, "would not consider the Church Fathers to be reliable authorities, or even recognize their names". For this reason, Johnson "firmly put aside all questions of Biblical interpretation and religious authority, in order to concentrate my energies on one theme". This theme is, though, one that he shares with Rose – a point of contact so deep as to render secondary all other differences between the two. "My theme is that, in Fr. Seraphim's words, 'evolution is *not* scientific fact at all, but philosophy". "Fr. Seraphim's thought", he continues, "was thoroughly at odds with twentieth-century science, shaped as that science has been by its *a priori* commitment to metaphysical materialism" (Johnson 2011, 90-91). For both Rose and Johnson, there can be no distinction between methodological and metaphysical naturalism, as some defenders of theistic evolution are wont to argue. In Johnson's view, creationism is essentially any viewpoint that contradicts blind, unguided evolutionary theory – it does not necessarily have to be "scientific creationism" of the young-earth variety, nor the patristically infused anti-modernism of Rose. Evolution is incompatible, in Johnson's view, with any sort of theism, because "evolution" (in the contemporary scientific usage) excludes not just creation-science but creationism in the broad sense" (Johnson 1991, 22). Evolutionary theory, in his view, only exists at all because it is the single viable alternative to creationism, and so scientists adhere to it out of "philosophical necessity". "Natural selection", he writes, "is the best of the remaining alternatives, probably the only alternative" (Johnson 1991, 49). Johnson holds up Rose as a heroic example of a tireless opponent to compulsory naturalism – someone who did not care for popularity or conformity and "was not intimidated by that sort of denunciation". He lauds as fundamental

Rose's insight that "evolution would never have been thought of by men who believe in the God whom Orthodox Christians worship" (Johnson 2011, 101-102). Critically, Johnson shares Rose's unflagging distrust of modernity. In his controversial article "The Wedge", Johnson argues that "the modernist scientific and intellectual world, with its materialist presumptions, [is] a thick and seemingly impenetrable fog". However, there is hope, as "there are a number of inviting cracks in modernism, but probably the most important one involves its creation story, and the huge gap between the materialist and empiricist definitions of science" (Johnson 1999). The subtitle of the infamous article encapsulates its central conflation of modernism and evolution: "Breaking the Modernist Monopoly on Science".

Reactions to Johnson's endorsement of Seraphim Rose have been mixed. Hieromonk Damascene directs warm encomia towards Johnson in his preface to Rose's work, while also extolling the virtues of ID. "The ID movement", he writes, "has succeeded in moving discussion of the weaknesses of Darwinism into the broad public sphere in ways that creation scientists have not". Furthermore:

"The ID movement has made another significant contribution in that, by shining a light on the fact that Darwinists deny the possibility of *any* supernatural causes behind the formation of living things, it has made the public more aware that the teaching of Darwinism is not philosophically or metaphysically neutral, but is based on the presupposition of naturalism: in Johnson's own words (which echo those of Fr. Seraphim quote earlier), it is 'inherently godless'". (Christensen 2011, 58-59)

Others have been shocked by Johnson's willingness to associate himself with Rose. "It is therefore a little surprising", write George and Elizabeth Theokritoff:

"that [Rose] is so unreservedly commended in the Introduction by Phillip Johnson, author of *Darwin on Trial*, etc. Johnson is 'gratified' that Fr Seraphim's presentation of the Fathers 'has thoroughly demolished one of the favorite canards of accommodationists'; he does not seem to mind that it has equally 'demolished' any notion of 'intelligently designed' life forms coming into being after the Six Days". (Theokritoff 2001, 367)

Any ID supporter willing to associate themselves so strongly with a figure like Rose is sailing into treacherous waters (at least, treacherous politically and legally – after all, it was ID's inescapable proximity to creationism that was its doom in federal court), but that they are willing to do so highlights the importance of finding allies in the fight against modernism and theistic evolution. And though Rose is not always cited by Orthodox advocates of Intelligent Design, his line of argument nevertheless has appeared in other settings during internecine debates about Christianity and evolution.

In a controversy with Howard Van Till in the ID journal *Origins & Design*, Eastern Orthodox creationist John Mark Reynolds attacked Van Till's usage of Augustine and Basil to promote

what he called the “functional integrity” of creation – Van Till’s bid to harmonize the Fathers, creation, evolution, and Genesis (Reynolds and Van Till 1998). The resulting debate bore some interesting fruit, as it was the direct impetus for a collection of ID-theorists to edit a large collection of patristic writings under the guiding assumption that the Church Fathers supported the ID and/or creationist perspective. William Dembski, a mathematician and one of the major figures of Intelligent Design, was editor of *Origins & Design* at the time, and so followed the debate between Van Till and Reynolds closely. He became “concerned about a wider pattern of attempts by scholars working at the intersection of science and religion to undercut the Church Fathers’ teaching on creation”. To counter this, Dembski (who converted to Eastern Orthodoxy in 1997 before returning to a Baptist denomination years later) reached out to other Discovery Institute fellows with the proposal to put together “a volume that encapsulated what the Church Fathers had to say, *in their own words* [emphasis in original], on the topic of creation”. The result was a volume entitled *The Patristic Understanding of Creation*, published in 2008, that sought to defend key Christian doctrines as “*creatio ex nihilo*, the transcendence and immanence of God in creation, the absolute creatureliness and non-self-sufficiency of the world”, the goodness of creation, and the openness of the world to divine action” against modern reinterpretations like “process theology and other efforts to reconceptualize creation”. These were positions, the editors felt, “the Church Fathers not only held but also ably defended” (Dembski, Downs, and Frederick 2008). In this setting, we find the full flowering of Rose’s argument, though taking root in a context he may not have predicted (or even been happy about). It is here, however, in response to creationism and Intelligent Design, that David Bentley Hart rebuts Rose, and those like him, most strongly.

Whereas Rose sought refuge from modernity in the redoubt of patristic creationism, Hart contends that it is the patristic doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* –not *creationism*– that offers true respite from the universal acid of nihilism. For Hart, the meaning of *creatio ex nihilo* is primarily ontological and eschatological, not historical. “The cardinal axiom of any Christian theological aesthetics”, writes Hart, is “that creation is without necessity” (Hart 2003, 256). That it is without necessity means that creation is to be understood, first and foremost, as a gift (Hart 2003, 260). Creation is, then, “but purely an expression of the superabundant joy and agape of the Trinity, joy and love are its only grammar and its only ground[...]”. Moreover, it is “a new emphasis in the divine dialect of triune love, whose full, perfect, and infinitely diverse expression is God’s eternal Word” (Hart 2003, 255). When Christians speak of an “analogy between creation and the God who gives it, it involves a subversion of many metaphysical concepts of being”, and it is this very annihilation of the nihilistic core of Western metaphysics that Heidegger found so incomprehensible (Hart 2003, 251). It is this subversion that rescues humanity from nihilism. Creation redeems philosophy because it “asserts that all things live, move, and are in God not because they add to God [...] but as gracious manifestations of his fullness” (Hart 2017b, 42). This, then, is the “Christian interruption” in the history of metaphysics, when “every principle of necessity was made subordinate to the higher principle of grace”. Rather than being another episode in the dreary history of nihilism’s slow gestation, Christianity “was in fact so profound a disruption of many of the

most basic premises of philosophy" that philosophy cannot function properly without it. The alternative can only be nihilism (Hart 2017b, 25-26). Furthermore, the doctrine of creation is not just a statement about the beginning of time, but also its end. "*Creatio ex nihilo* is not merely a cosmological or metaphysical claim", he writes, "but is also an eschatological claim about the world's relationship to God, and hence a moral claim about the nature of God in himself". Following Maximus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Origen, Hart contends that creation is in fact a theophany—one that shows the end for which all was made—and argues that creation is not fully completed until it arrives at its terminus in the eschaton (Hart 2017b, 339-340).

Hart's understanding of the history of creation and the creation narratives of the Bible are—following the above discussion—fundamentally different from Rose's. Hart, for his part, levies the accusations of modernist collaboration in the opposite direction. It is the literalists, the creationists, and the ID theorists who are the true children of the modern biblical hermeneutic. He is highly critical of Intelligent Design, but he does find in it a foe worth consideration, as opposed to young earth creationism, which he argues is contradicted by "nothing less than the entire universe and every physical datum that it contains" (Hart 2017a, 58). ID, though a modern mistake, nevertheless raises questions about metaphysics and design for theology—but while Hart shares some of ID's criticisms, he vehemently disagrees with the solutions proffered by Rose, Johnson, and Intelligent Design as a whole.

The primary point of agreement between Hart and ID theorists such as Johnson is on the question of methodological naturalism's relation to metaphysical naturalism. Hart notes that the dominant mechanistic view of nature encouraged by science has "begun to evolve into a metaphysical naturalism", leaving scientists and philosophers with an impoverished view of the world that evinces "no reality beyond the closed continuum of physical exchanges of matter and energy". In an assertion that Phillip Johnson would surely agree with, Hart writes, "there can be no accord reached between any theistic logic and the tacit mechanistic or physicalist or emergentist materialist metaphysics that so deeply informs much of the culture of the sciences today". Like many ID advocates (Dembski, *Uncommon Dissent*), Hart locates the problem in methodological naturalism's exclusion of teleology—or, as he prefers, "finality"—from science; this move, for Hart, was necessary for methodological science because teleological ideas resisted empiricism, but it nevertheless left the door open for a purely mechanistic view of the cosmos and a materialist ontology. While early moderns may have tried to restrict the physicalist methods of science to the physical realm (allowing, for instance, the existence of such ethereal concepts as the mind, soul, spirits, and God), this tenuous situation could not last forever. As Hart writes, "reason abhors a dualism". Therefore, methodological naturalism eventually "metastasized into a metaphysics, almost by inadvertence [...]. Those methodological brackets that had been so helpfully drawn around the physical order now became the very shape of reality itself" (Hart 2018).

What sets Hart apart from ID, then? Foremost, Hart accepts evolutionary biology as an accurate historical picture of the world. He even lauds Richard Dawkins's *The Greatest Show on Earth* as

an excellent introduction to the field (and Dawkins, if he is ever cited by ID advocates, usually functions as the ID movement's *bête noire*) (Hart 2017a). While it is true that his identification of methodological naturalism as a (potential) problem is consonant with ID's critiques, Hart nevertheless proposes a different solution than ID advocates do: rather than scouring nature for evidence of God's divine action—in an effort to empirically prove the existence of God and overthrow evolution entirely—Hart instead admits an affection for physiologist Denis Noble's understanding of "natural teleology" within nature and evolutionary history. The key difference, then, is one of an extrinsic design levied from without (Intelligent Design), and the classical, pre-modern view of creation through an "intrinsic rational determination within a complex system". Intelligent Design theory, departing from classical thinking, offers creation as a "factitious purpose extrinsically imposed by some detached designing intelligence". Noble's recent work (2016) looms large in this story. As Hart reads Noble, the mid-century idea of the "atomic" gene, "the DNA molecule as the primordial genetic repository of information", is no longer viable. While not critical of evolution *per se*, Hart's perspective bears similarity to several of the critiques of neo-Darwinism (the perspective usually associated with the "modern synthesis" from the mid-twentieth century) that have been leveled by James Shapiro (2011), Lynn Margulis (1999), and Massimo Pigliucci (2010). Hart (following Noble) argues that Dawkins's view of the "selfish gene" is not a valid picture of evolutionary biology or history. That does not mean, for Hart, that science should be fundamentally remade—after all, he argues that "practically speaking", these various perspectives make little difference. The real shift comes not when one considers the practical efficacy of science, but rather when one considers the "culture of the sciences" and the importance of remembering the limits on one's method (Hart 2018).

Where does that leave ID, in Hart's view? ID theorists, though sharing the same desire to critique methodological naturalism and the gene-centric view of evolution, nevertheless fall prey to that most modern of theological mistakes: the understanding of God as a tinkerer external to the universe who must inject himself into the cosmos at discrete points in history. The early moderns who attempted to find a place for God outside the physical universe "granted room only for the adventitious and finite Cosmic Mechanic or Supreme Being of Deism or (as it is called today) Intelligent Design Theory". Rather than the classical theistic "metaphysics of participation in a God of infinite being and rationality", Intelligent Design has posited another instantiation of early modern deism, the same dualistic view of the divine and nature that inadvertently led to the rise of metaphysical naturalism out of methodological naturalism in the first place (Hart 2018). For Hart, the "Intelligent Designer" bears more similarity to the demiurge of Plato's *Timaeus* than it does to the God of traditional Christian metaphysics. This Intelligent Designer is not the necessarily existent being of pure act, from which all contingent beings derive their own existence. It is, rather, a "causal agent of the world of space and time, working upon materials that lie outside and below him, under the guidance of divine principles that lie outside and above him" (Hart 2013, 35). The ID perspective is comprised entirely of "logically and epistemologically unverifiable arguments regarding irreducible complexity and its crude mechanistic deism and its all-too-immanent god of the gaps" (Hart 2016, 9). Even ID's most noteworthy argument (Michael Behe's notion of "irreducible complexity") "may

seem compelling at the purely intuitive level but [...] can never be demonstrated. At the end of the day, it is [...] an argument from personal incredulity" (Hart 2017a, 59). Ultimately, Hart describes this post-classical view of God as a distinctly modern variation of "monopolytheism", his term for "a view of God not conspicuously different from the polytheistic picture of the gods as merely very powerful discrete entities [...]. It differs from polytheism [...] solely in that it posits the existence of only one such being" (Hart 2013, 127). Not only is Intelligent Design bad theology, in Hart's view, it is not Christian theology at all, but a noxious hodge-podge of theistic personalism and scientific incredulity, two primary ingredients stewed together in a pot of modernist biblical interpretation. Hart's view here is similar to the one advocated by Conor Cunningham (2010), who likewise condemned ID as a "heresy" even while resisting neo-Darwinian understandings of the gene and its role in evolution. For both Hart and Cunningham, whatever merits ID may have in challenging metaphysical presuppositions, the movement is undone by its ironic fidelity to modern theological commitments.

Beyond that, there is more wrong with ID, in Hart's view, than just scientific or theological weakness, and he brooks no argument that ID-theorists or young-earth creationists have the backing of the Church Fathers. To illustrate the radical difference of patristic understandings of creation from contemporary ones, Hart argues that Basil of Caesarea understood the "beginning" of Genesis 1 as "the eternal, indivisible, and immediate bringing into existence of the whole of creation, from its beginning to its end". Origen, John Chrysostom, and Augustine understood "beginning" as a reference to the divine Logos. Gregory of Nyssa believed that "the act of creation is timeless, [and] the world had unfolded progressively in time, out of its own intrinsic potencies and principles, with nature itself acting as the craftsman". There is room there for something like evolutionary history. Hart challenges his opponents to look at medieval or ancient sources and find any literalist methods of interpretation, writing that "anyone searching medieval commentaries on the creation narratives of Genesis for signs of fundamentalist literalism will be largely disappointed" (Hart 2013, 26).

That is not to say the Fathers avoided literal interpretation. They employed such methods, but what they meant by literal was not anything like what is meant by that word today. The contemporary confusion does not result from an inability to understand allegory, but rather from an inability to understand what the Fathers meant by literal reading. For those benighted moderns of today, a literal reading is "taking a text as an accurate documentary account of real events". Hart uses the example of Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, writing that a literalist interpretation of that text requires one to imagine that a poor soul named Gregor Samsa spontaneously transmogrified into a beetle one morning in early 20th century Prague. On the heels of this kind of reading, one might be compelled to search the city for evidence of such a nightmarish event. On the other hand, for the ancients, reading literally meant reading "*ad litteram* [...]" with an exactly scrupulous attention to what was written on the page, in every detail". "The difference", he continues, "between the literal and the allegorical was simply the difference between what was there to be seen and what was given to be discovered". This had important consequences for the Church Fathers, who read texts in ways

that varied wildly from each other. In Hart's view, "It seems clear that Gregory of Nyssa did not believe that God ever truly slew the firstborn of Egypt". For many of the Fathers, "the historical issue was quite irrelevant to how 'literal' any given reading of Scripture was" (Hart 2016, 275-276). To read something as literal was to read it as it was written, to scour the text for its "plain meaning" was to understand it as a narrative intending to communicate universal truths. Reading literally did not mean understanding any pericope, especially in *Genesis*, as a blow-by-blow account of a historical event. The Basil quote that Rose thought sufficient to put all allegorical talk to rest, is, then, not a vindication of Rose's literalism, but its defeat. For Hart, Basil's words, "Therefore, let it [*Genesis*] be understood as it has been written", reflect not literalism but reading *ad litteram*.

Altogether, we see in Seraphim Rose and David Bentley Hart two of the dominant figures of contemporary American Orthodoxy, and we see how different two perspectives from within that branch of Orthodoxy can be. Rose is representative of a more zealous and ascetic strand of Orthodox converts, and he was dedicated to the defense of the pure and undefiled Orthodox Church against the perceived dangers of ecumenism (retaining, especially, a strident anti-Catholicism) and modern science (particularly evolutionary biology). Hart, on the other hand, desires open dialogue with other traditions, both Christian and non-Christian, and seeks to maintain an authentically patristic theology against the degrading assaults of not only modern fundamentalism and literalism, but modern secularism as well. Both Hart and Rose understand modernity as the full expression of nihilism, and—critically—each argue that the doctrine of creation holds the key in resisting it; how they understand creation, however, and how they view its role in conjunction with science, varies quite radically. Whereas Rose felt modernity's nihilism manifested itself in ecumenism and in evolution, Hart sees it in fundamentalist literalism and the libertarian will.

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Though Hart and Rose are opposed in understanding how the Orthodox might resist modernity, they are perhaps not so different in terms of their vanishing hope for the future. Hart has sounded a rather despairing note in his suspicion that Christianity's defeat is seemingly inevitable. With Christianity languishing in decline in the West, remaining now only as a decaying ossature that is struggling to uphold the modern world, and is liable at any moment to collapse, Hart wonders if the best option remaining for Christians is to treat the desert of modernity rather more literally. Taking heart from the examples of Anthony and the Desert Fathers, in the face of the decline of Christianity in the "late modern West", a life "in willing exile from the world of social prestige and power, may perhaps again become the model that Christians will find themselves compelled to emulate". Hart notes that he is not necessarily suggesting a "great new monastic movement", but rather a conscious separation from the "Western culture [that] threatens to become something of a desert for believers" (Hart 2009, 241). But who, when all is considered, is most emblematic of this approach? Perhaps it is Seraphim Rose himself, who saw in the full flowering of nihilism an implacable foe, and

who sought not to stay in the world, but to leave for the mountains and live out his days raging as a prophet before the onslaught of modernity and its essential nihilism. As Rose said, it is in the desert that he found “a refuge from the storms and occupations of the world” (Christensen, 1993, 477).

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