"Since Those Days All Things Have Progressed for the Better": Tradition, Progress, and Creation in Ambrose of Milan*

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Abstract

In Ambrose's apologetic writing against the Roman prefect Symmachus, he makes a surprising argument for Christianity's superiority over Roman religious practices, arguing that Christianity is in fact a newer and therefore superior form of religion. The whole world has "progressed" and so must religious practices. In the letters to Symmachus, Ambrose's arguments are ad hoc and apologetic, not constructive. This article seeks to understand better the intellectual and historical contexts that make Ambrose's surprising convictions possible by looking at Ambrose's writings on creation in the context of the pro-Nicene debates. Considering Ambrose's writing in the *Hexameron*, I argue that Ambrose's account of cosmological progress finds an intellectual milieu in pro-Nicene reflection on the implications of Christ's divine consubstantiality for a doctrine of creation. When Christ is no longer seen as a mediator between God and the world, a new space is opened up to speak of creation's change and even "progress" without a worry that doing so will jeopardize creation as the divine handiwork. Ambrose's apologetic strategy, though apparently not directly related to pro-Nicene debates, is illuminated when seen against this backdrop. The result is a better understanding both of Ambrose's strategies in particular and of the situation of fourth-century apologetics more broadly.

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Introduction

In Ambrose's famous exchange with the Roman prefect Q. Aurelius Symmachus in 384 CE over the Altar of Victory, he makes one of the more surprising apologetic arguments for Christianity's superiority over ancient Roman religious customs. Instead of claiming Christianity's deeper antiquity, as so many of his predecessors had done, Ambrose claims that Christianity is in fact newer, and just for that reason, superior. In a seeming about-face with earlier apologetic tradition, which prized the old over the new, Ambrose offers an account of how Christianity's novelty was the very grounds for its replacement of the ancient Roman customs—for this was in keeping with the progress of the natural world, where "all things have progressed for the better" (*omnia postea in melius profecerunt*).[1] In the correspondence with Symmachus (*ep*. 72–73 = Maurist 17–18), Ambrose's arguments are made hastily and, prima facie, without theoretical substantiation. Appreciating the apologetic nature of these letters, D. H. Williams has recently commented that Ambrose is not here "constructing a theory, much less adducing a conception of progress," but is rather attempting to undermine the foundation of Symmachus's argument.[2] The deconstructive purpose in these letters, in other words, does not constitute a developed doctrine of creation.

In this essay I peruse other sources for Ambrose's view of creation in order to ask what, if any, theoretical substructure might support the argumentation Ambrose makes in his writing against Symmachus. Considering Ambrose's writing in the *Hexameron* in particular (written in the late 380s), I argue that Ambrose is privy to concurrent but distinct developments in pro-Nicene thought concerning creation, which offered a more refined grammar for relating creation to the creative logos of the divine being; this in turn allowed for greater freedom to speak of creation's "progress." Ambrose's writing, on this score, evidences a development in apologetic strategy that combines ways of thinking about history and religious custom with ways of imagining time and the cosmic order more broadly.

I take as my point of departure a minor but illuminating point in Lewis Ayres's 2004 *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, in which he shows that a corresponding aspect to fourth-century Nicene debates were certain adaptations of the theological and philosophical traditions concerning creation and cosmology.[3] Ayres highlights

[1] Ambrose, *ep*. 73.23 (*Sancti Ambrosi Opera: Pars Decima; Epistularum Liber Decimus*, *Epistulae extra Collectionem*, *Gesta Concili Aquileiensis* [ed. Michaela Zelzer, CSEL 82/3; Vienna: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, 1982] 470; also *Ambrose of Milan: Political Letters and Speeches* [trans. J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, with Carole Hill; Translated Texts for Historians 43; Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005] 89).

[2] D. H. Williams, "Ambrose as an Apologist," *StPatr* 85 (2017) 65–75, at 73.

[3] Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 312–21. For a

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Basil of Caesarea's *Hexameron* and Augustine's *De Genesi ad litteram* as examples of how pro-Nicenes conceptualized the "immediacy" of God's role in creation, related to a stress on the creative Word's consubstantial relation to the divine being. Ayres writes: "The collapsing of any hierarchy beyond the created order serves to demonstrate the intimacy of the creation's relation to God."[4] This in turn led pro-Nicenes to a greater attentiveness to the ways in which creation reflected the Triune God's infinite *dynamis* while also remaining ontologically distinct. At the same time, they underscored how creation could serve to draw believers into deeper participation in God's life. These dynamics, I will argue in reference to Ambrose, lent themselves to a greater consideration of natural developments in creation, with less of a need to stress the world's immutability and timelessness.

The fact that Ayres discusses Basil's *Hexameron* and Augustine's *De Genesi ad litteram* prompts consideration of Ambrose's *Hexameron* in a similar mode. It is widely acknowledged that Ambrose drew heavily on Basil's work for his own composition[5] and was himself influential on Augustine's anti-Manichaean interpretation of Genesis.[6] Preached in the latter half of the 380s, likely during Holy Week of 387, Ambrose's *Hexameron* follows a pattern set out by earlier Christians for expounding the first six days of creation.[7] Though he preached it after the correspondence with Symmachus, it is feasible that Ambrose knew of Basil's work (composed in the late 370s) sometime earlier. Regardless, I am not interested in proving that Ambrose's *Hexameron* was in any direct way influential for his writing against Symmachus. My main concern is to explore how the pro-Nicene context of reflection on creation may illuminate, or at least make plausible, Ambrose's seemingly odd arguments against Symmachus.[8]

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fuller account of creation in patristic thought along similar lines, see Paul Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy: Creator and Creation in Early Christian Theology and Piety* (OECS; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[4] Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 318.

[5] Louis J. Swift writes, perhaps unjustly, that "scarcely a page of Ambrose's [*Hexameron*] is without a borrowed thought, a reworked passage or a translated excerpt from the Cappadocian's work" (Swift, "Basil and Ambrose on the Six Days of Creation," *Aug* 21 [1981] 317–28, at 317). See also on this issue Hervé Savon, "Physique des philosophes et cosmologie de la Genèse chez Basile de Césarée et Ambroise de Milan," in *Philosophies non chrétiennes et christianisme* (Brussels: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1984) 57–72.

[6] Pierre Courcelle has argued that Augustine even heard Ambrose's hexameral sermons during Holy Week of 387, though this is not completely accepted (Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessiones de saint Augustin* [Paris: de Boccard, 1950] 93–106).

[7] Frank Egleston Robbins, *The Hexaemeral Literature: A Study of the Greek and Latin Commentaries on Genesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1912).

[8] A final feature that prompts comparison of these two texts is that, if there is a major difference between Ambrose and Basil on these texts, it is that Ambrose's work is markedly more polemical than Basil's pastoral approach. As Swift explains: "Though Basil spends much time refuting opponents' views, he is inclined to begin and end his sermons on a pastoral note with expressions of anxiety over the welfare of the congregation, exhortations to virtue, or statements of wonder at nature's beauty. However much he gets involved in polemics, the pastoral role is always before him. Ambrose's [*Hexameron*] is organized somewhat differently. In the first six sermons pastoral

To draw out these evolving notions of tradition and creation, it will be necessary first to review Ambrose's arguments with Symmachus before turning to a more extended reflection on the *Hexameron*, especially the first homily, followed by a brief excursus situating Ambrose within his pro-Nicene milieu. By interpreting Ambrose's arguments in *ep.* 73 in light of his writings on creation in the *Hexameron*, a more nuanced theological account of God's providential relation to creation emerges, providing the backdrop to the more cursory apologetic arguments he makes against Symmachus.

Ambrose and Symmachus on Tradition

If Ambrose were to convince the nominally Christian audience of *ep.* 73 that the return of the Altar was a more serious issue than it first appeared, a key task would be to undermine Symmachus's arguments from tradition.[9] Not only was this one of the key strategies in Symmachus's *Relatio*, it was also a prominent sentiment that funded the Roman sense of nobility. To be a senator of *nobilitas*, one needed not only economic wealth or a legal title but also a link to the past.[10] This was something Symmachus possessed—coming from an established Italian family—and something to which many upstart senators would have been attracted. Ambrose's letter thus focuses on tradition as a means of unmasking the threat posed by Symmachus's argument, and indeed Symmachus himself as an embodiment of the quintessential Roman *nobilitas.*

Many scholars have noted the importance of tradition for Roman intellectuals in the late fourth century.[11] Michele Salzman summarizes: "The preservation of

concerns are subordinated in large measure to polemical ones. Only with the seventh homily do we get a relaxation of the defensive mode and a growing preoccupation with explicating the text for the community of the faithful" (Swift, "Basil and Ambrose on the Six Days," 319).

[9] Classic studies of this famous episode include Jean-Rémy Palanque, *Saint Ambroise et l'Empire romain. Contribution à l'histoire des rapports de l'église et de l'état à la fin du quatrième siècle* (Paris: de Boccard, 1933); Leokadia Małunowicz, *De ara Victoriae in Curia Romana* (Vilnius: Société des Sciences, 1937); Henri Bloch, "A New Document of the Last Pagan Revival in the West, 393–394 AD," *HTR* 38 (1945) 199–244; Hans A. Pohlsander, "Victory: The Story of a Statue," *Historia* 18 (1969) 588–97; Richard Klein, *Der Streit um den Victoriaaltar. Die dritte Relatio des Symmachus und die Briefe 17, 18 und 57 des Mailänder Bischofs Ambrosius* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1972); James J. Sheridan, "The Altar of Victory: Paganism's Last Battle," *L'antiquité Classique* 35 (1966) 186–206. More recently, see Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of the Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350–550 AD* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012) 103–9; Rita Lizzi Testa, "The Famous 'Altar of Victory Controversy' in Rome," in *Contested Monarchy*: *Integrating the Roman Empire in the Fourth Century AD* (ed. Johannes Wienand; Oxford Studies in Late Antiquity; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) 405–21; and Williams, "Ambrose as an Apologist," 65–75.

[10] Brown regards *nobilitas* to result from a convergence of three factors: birth, culture, and high office. But a significant feature is the antiquity of their gained wealth: "Their wealth was not that of parvenus, gained only recently from collaboration with the new empire of Constantine. Rather, they were the parvenus of an earlier age" (Brown, *Eye of the Needle*, 94–95).

[11] See especially François Paschoud, "Le rôle du providentialisme dans le conflit de 384 sur l'autel de la Victoire," *MH* 40 (1983) 197–206; Michele Renee Salzman, "Reflections on Symmachus'

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tradition has been viewed as the 'most potent factor of the senatorial resistance' and a key component of the propaganda of the last decades of the fourth century."[12] While arguments for tradition were not new in this period, they seem to have been invested with a new sense of urgency. In making his particular case, Symmachus employs at least three arguments from tradition for the support of Roman religious customs: one utilitarian, another based on nature, and a final one based on a theological claim.

Symmachus's utilitarian arguments are quite conventional. He emphasizes, in a manner reminiscent of Cicero's *De natura deorum*,[13] the *utilitas* of honoring the gods as that "which more than anything else convinces men that gods exist."[14] He recognizes the need to honor the gods who provided safety in eras past ("Who is on such good terms with the barbarians as not to need the altar of Victory?"),[15] and he invokes the mere presence of religion (*praesentia religionis*) as a "very powerful deterrent to wrongdoing."[16] Doubtless, the recent military defeats and famines—even the untimely death of the emperor Gratian—would have had many Romans looking to ancient customs as means of procuring imperial success. It is in this sense that François Paschoud refers to Symmachus's argument as a form of divine "providentialisme"—one that outlines the "contract" between the divine and human spheres.[17] This was not an attempt to romanticize the past; rather, the antiquity of Roman customs served as a very practical application to Rome's present concerns.[18]

In addition to arguing for the *utilitas* of tradition, Symmachus shows how adherence to custom is inherent in the natural order. Symmachus appeals to traditional religion as a way of upholding the *mos majorum*, the custom of the elders, especially of one's own parents.[19] He must show where and how Valentinian ought to follow and where he ought to correct his predecessors, especially Constantius and Gratian.[20] Symmachus's use of *prosopopoiea* (personification) to speak in the voice of Rome is another instance of a kind of natural argument for antiquity.[21] Lady

Idea of Tradition," *Historia* 38 (1989) 348–64.

[12] Salzman, "Symmachus' Idea of Tradition," 348, quoting Norman H. Baynes, review of J. A. McGeachy, "Quintus Aurelius Symmachus and the Senatorial Aristocracy of the West" (PhD diss., University of Chicago) 1942.

[13] See, e.g., Cotto's speech in Cicero, *Nat. d.* 3.2.

[14] Symmachus, *Rel.* 3.8 (CSEL 82/3: 26; *Ambrose of Milan* [trans. Liebeschuetz] 73–74).

[15] Ibid., 3.3 (CSEL 82/3:23; *Ambrose of Milan* [trans. Liebeschuetz] 72).

[16] Ibid., 3.8 (CSEL 82/3:25; *Ambrose of Milan* [trans. Liebeschuetz] 73).

[17] As Paschoud describes, this kind of providence concerns "d'une attidude of religieuse utilitariste, qui considère le respect des rites et des préceptes comme faisant partie d'un accord qui impose aussi au contractant divin des obligations précises," and well summed up by the Latin formula *do ut des* ("Le rôle du providentialisme," 197).

[18] Averil Cameron, "Remaking the Past," in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World* (ed. G. W. Bowersock, P. R. L. Brown, and O. Grabar; Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999) 1–20, at 1.

[19] Salzman, "Symmachus' Idea of Tradition," 350.

[20] Symmachus, *Rel*. 3.3 (CSEL 82/3:25; *Ambrose of Milan* [trans. Liebeschuetz] 73).

[21] Ibid., 3.9. A parallel is found slightly later in Claudian, *Bell. Gild.* 1.21–25.

Roma protests that she is too old to change, that the emperor ought to have "respect for her years."[22] Finally, Symmachus shows the inherent naturalness of preserving custom in the sentiment, "love of tradition is a great thing" (*consuetudinis amor magnus est*). As Salzman notes, the choice of the word *consuetudo* to describe tradition "conveys the impression that the continuance of pagan rites is virtually a biological need as well as a natural right."[23] The love for tradition, for Symmachus, was stitched deeply into the fabric of human existence.

However, the most eloquent, or at least most famous, disputation Symmachus makes against the "innovation" of removing the Altar is a theological one. The divine mind (*mens divina*) is too far beyond human comprehension to be captured by any one religious expression, and so has "distributed" different rites and cults to particular locales.[24] Symmachus writes: "It is reasonable to think that whatever is worshiped by each of us is ultimately the same. We look at the same stars. We share the same sky. The same universe surrounds us. What does it matter with what philosophy each individual seeks for the truth? It is not possible to reach so great a secret (*secretum*) by a single route."[25] Such arguments were not uncommon among Neoplatonic writers of his day, such as Marius Victorinus[26] or Themistius,[27] and can be traced back to earlier Middle Platonic rationales, as found in Cicero, for example.[28] Here Symmachus applies them to appeal for the restoration of the Altar and the subsidies owed to priests and vestal virgins. Symmachus will go on to raise issues concerning the economic problems related to the defunding of priests and vestal virgins—points to which Ambrose will also respond. In some sense these may be the more pressing concerns. However, it is especially the arguments concerning tradition, which impinge on his view of history and the divine-cosmological relation, that provide a substantial focus for Ambrose's reply.

[22] Optimi principes, patres patriae, reveremini annos meos in quos me pius ritus adduxit (Symmachus, *Rel*. 3.9 [CSEL 82/3:26–27; *Ambrose of Milan* (trans. Liebeschuetz) 74]).

[23] Salzman, "Symmachus' Idea of Tradition," 350.

[24] Suus enim cuique mos, cuique ritus est; varios custodes urbibus cultus mens divina distribuit (Symmachus, *Rel*. 3.8 [CSEL 82/3:26; *Ambrose of Milan* (trans. Liebeschuetz) 73]).

[25] Aequum est quicquid omnes colunt unum putari. Eadem spectamus astra, commune caelum est, idem nos mundus involuit; quid interest qua quisque prudentia verum requirat? Uno itinere non potest perveniri ad tam grande secretum (ibid. 3.10 [CSEL 82/3:27; *Ambrose of Milan* (trans. Liebeschuetz) 74]).

[26] Salzman, "Symmachus' Idea of Tradition," 350 n. 11, who also cites Porphyry.

[27] Maijastina Kahlos credits Themistius for Symmachus's use of monistic language to argue for the "internal unity of religions" and the athletic metaphor of the path (Maijastina Kahlos, *Forbearance and Compulsion: The Rhetoric of Religious Tolerance and Intolerance in Late Antiquity* [London: Duckworth, 2009] 97). For Themistius, see *Or.* 5.69A.

[28] In addition to *Nat. d.,* see the parallel idea in Cicero, *Div.* 2.148: "For it is the part of the wise man to preserve ancestral traditions by retaining rituals and ceremonies; and, meanwhile, both the beauty of the world and the regularity of celestial phenomena force us to confess the existence of an all-powerful and eternal nature which must be sustained and worshipped by the race of humans" (Loeb Classical Library 20:537).

On the surface, Ambrose's response to Symmachus appears to break with traditional apologetic arguments, which stressed Christianity's antiquity. At some points he even appears to depart from an account of God's providential ordering of human affairs, positing instead mere human causality as the reason for Rome's defeats and misfortunes. What are we to make of these tactics?

A cursory glance at apologetic writing from the second and third centuries makes it apparent that early Christians expended great energy to justify their status in the empire by appealing to the antiquity of Christianity. Apologists such as Justin Martyr, Tatian, Theophilus, Tertullian, Lactantius, Minucius Felix, and others argued for Christianity's superiority to Greek philosophies and religions by proving Christianity's more ancient origins, and thus its more divinely inspired account of truth.[29] The best of Plato, to these apologists, was merely plagiarized Moses. The link to antiquity was central to proving the legitimacy of the Christian faith against accusations that it was a novel *superstitio*.

Such arguments are surprisingly absent in Ambrose's apologetic against Symmachus, however. In fact, instead of arguing for the antiquity of Christianity, Ambrose makes the case that Christianity is in fact new, and just for that reason superior to Roman religion. Even more provocatively, Ambrose interweaves his account of Christianity's novelty with an apparently secularizing reading of providential history.[30] In his alternative personification of Lady Rome, Ambrose rebukes Symmachus's notion that the gods, whose favor was secured through the ancient customs, enabled the protection and security of Rome. It was not the "useless blood of harmless herds" that enabled Rome's victory but her military skill and courageous leadership: "Africanus won his triumph fighting amid the battle-lines of Hannibal, not among the altars on the Capitol."[31] Likewise, against the claims that the Roman divinities protected the city against floods and famine, Ambrose shows that annual harvests and crop yields imply no congruency with fidelity to traditional worship practices. Ambrose appears to undercut the Roman account of providence, not with an alternative Christian account but by contending that Rome's fortunes or calamities were not due to the activity of the gods but instead to its military might and the fluctuations of nature.

Ambrose proceeds to bolster his account of the superiority of Christianity with an argument that this superiority is in keeping with the natural improvement of the world itself. In his counter *prosopopoiea* of Rome, Ambrose has her admit that, although she is "white-haired with age," she is ashamed of her past and has now "converted along with the whole world" (*cum toto orbe longaeva converti*).[32]

[29] See Arthur J. Droge, *Homer or Moses? Early Christian Interpretations of the History of Culture* (HUT 26; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989).

[30] Paschoud argues that Ambrose differs from Augustine's *City of God* in this regard, and even from his own earlier account of providence in *De fide*, where he interpreted the invading Goths in terms of Ezekiel's "Gog" ("Le rôle du providentialisme," 204–6).

[31] Ambrose, *ep.* 73.7 (CSEL 82/3:37; *Ambrose of Milan* [trans. Liebeschuetz] 82).

[32] Paenitet lapsus, vetusta canities pudenda sanguinis traxit ruborem. Non erubesco cum toto

"To change to the better side is nothing to be ashamed of," she confesses.[33] Where Symmachus had drawn on Rome's antiquity to express resistance to altering the ancient customs, Ambrose reverses the pattern, showing how Rome's old age is not incompatible with the possibility of conversion to the newer and better.

When he returns to similar arguments later in the letter, it is in the context of responding to Symmachus's request that "the cult of our ancestors must be preserved."[34] Here Ambrose's sense of cosmological progress comes into sharp relief. "What about the fact that since those days all things have progressed for the better" (*Quid quod omnia postea in melius profecerunt*)?[35] One sees this betterment, Ambrose says, in the two-stage pattern of the world's origins:

> The world itself, in its beginnings, condensed to form an unstable sphere from the seeds of the elements, which had been brought together through the vastness of empty space. Earlier still it was enveloped in the darkness of the chaos of the yet unshaped work, and at a later stage, when heaven, earth and sea had been made distinct from each other, the world received the pattern of things which gives it its beauty.[36]

The bishop proceeds by finding accounts of progress everywhere in nature: in the cycles of the moon, which emerge from darkness to light (and also prefigure the church);[37] in the way in which land is cultivated through agricultural practices;[38] and in the fields that are barren at the beginning of the year but eventually produce a rich harvest.[39] With heavy allusions to the rustic imagery of Virgil's poetry, Ambrose adapts themes of natural development from classical literature into a creative argument for Christianity's supersession of Greco-Roman religion.[40]

If traditional Romans are to be consistent about their maintenance of ancient customs, Ambrose prods, they should deny all these accounts of progress in the natural world and instead "say that everything should have remained as it was in its beginnings."[41] They would need to admit that the once-darkened world "now displeases them, since it has been illuminated by the brightness of the sun."[42] Ambrose counters that we can welcome the fact that the "youthful condition of

orbe longaeva converti (ibid.).

[33] Nullus pudor est ad meliora transire (ibid. [CSEL 82/3:38; *Ambrose of Milan* (trans. Liebeschuetz) 83]).

[34] Ibid., 73.23 (CSEL 82/3:47; *Ambrose of Milan* [trans. Liebeschuetz] 89).

[35] Ibid.

[36] Mundus ipse, qui vel primum coactis elementorum per inane seminibus, tenero orbe, concreverat, vel confuso adhuc indigesti operis caligabat horrore; nonne postea distincto coeli, maris, terrarumque discrimine, rerum formas quibus speciosus videtur, accepit (ibid.).

[37] Ibid., 73.24 (CSEL 82/3:47; *Ambrose of Milan* [trans. Liebeschuetz] 89).

[38] Ibid., 73.25 (CSEL 82/3:48; *Ambrose of Milan* [trans. Liebeschuetz] 89–90).

[39] Ibid., 73.26 (CSEL 82/3:49; *Ambrose of Milan* [trans. Liebeschuetz] 90).

[40] Liebeschuetz cites references to Virgil, *Ecl.* 6.31–38; *Aen.* 1.292, 3.645; and *Georg.* 1.99, 2.51, as well as allusions to Horace's *Odes* in this section (*Ambrose of Milan* [trans. Liebeschuetz] 89–90).

[41] Ambrose, *ep.* 73.28 (CSEL 82/3:48; *Ambrose of Milan* [trans. Liebeschuetz] 90).

[42] Ibid.

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the world, as of everything else, has given way in order that the venerable old age of 'grey haired faith' can take its place."[43] We should no more be troubled by the advent of new religious customs than by the fact that seeds grow into harvests.

He concludes these arguments by connecting the various forms of natural development to the maturation of humanity as a result of the Christian faith: "our faith too is a harvest, a harvest of souls."[44] The emergence of the Christian faith is, like the development of the world, a part of natural law. In a mature world, people can now see that Victory is not herself a goddess but the gift of divine power. "Victory is bestowed; it does not rule."[45] At this point Ambrose seems to have altered, or at least nuanced, his earlier argument that Rome's success was a result of military might instead of divine providence. Where earlier it appeared that Ambrose offered a secularized explanation of Rome's victories, he now shows that in fact these victories were due to the role of God's providence—though it takes a mature Christian Rome, who has forsaken her idolatrous past, to see how this is so. This pattern of apparent providential distancing (separating natural or essential relations between the divine and created orders) and subsequent re-theologizing (reconnecting the orders through an account of divine will) is a pattern he will exemplify in the *Hexameron*.

Ambrose here has not given a very in-depth or satisfactory account of creation. Nor was that his intention. He has made these remarks, again, to reveal the fault lines beneath Symmachus's plea for the restoration of the Altar of Victory based on tradition. His concerns are apologetic, not constructive. Nonetheless, the significant contrast with earlier apologists warrants probing why and how Ambrose thought that boldly declaring the superiority of Christianity as the result of the natural progression of the world would have the kind of suasive appeal he imagined.

Ambrose on Providence and Creation in the *Hexameron*

Ambrose was able to make such seemingly novel apologetic arguments, not because he assumed a non-providentialist or progressivist account of history, but because he had imbibed a new form of theological providence, one that emphasized the relative independence of the world—creation as ontologically separate from God—but that was nevertheless intimately related to God through its being ordered to the divine will. The developments in theological pictures of creation, which Ambrose learned from pro-Nicene theologians like Basil of Caesarea, provided a language to clarify the ontological distinction between creator and creature while still affirming God's proximity or nearness. In viewing Ambrose's reflections on creation in the *Hexameron*, we see something of the larger intellectual habitus that makes possible the apologetic novelty of *ep.* 73.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid., 73.30 (CSEL 82/3:49; *Ambrose of Milan* [trans. Liebeschuetz] 91).

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Before turning to the *Hexameron*, it must be noted how discordant this cosmic imaginary would have been within the typically Greco-Roman framework. Influenced to a large degree by a Platonic notion of the forms, most philosophies, as E. R. Dodds pointed out some time ago, were resistant to ideas of change and progression.[46] As the immutable forms preexisted materiality and temporality, the flux of human history was seen as but the deviation and return to an originary state. "For Plato all progress consists in approximation to a pre-existing model. . . . There is thus, strictly speaking, no open future and no such thing as invention."[47] While ideas of progress similar to Ambrose's were not entirely foreign to the Greeks—Dodds points to second-century (BCE) scientists like Archimedes and Hipparchus—the primary mold of Antique Platonism resisted ideas of an evolving world.[48]

If by the Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic periods, philosophers continued to be reluctant to accept ideas of progress, they were so despite new and competing ways in which to view the world's relation to the divine and semidivine creative principles. In Middle Platonic thought, as John Dillon notes, the idea of the forms "suffered various transformations" as the Platonic demiurge converged with the Stoic Logos, making possible the inevitable link of the forms to the mind of God.[49] In Plotinus, a notion of the demiurge had all but disappeared, being subsumed into a metaphysical monism that distanced the One from the world and matter through the various emanations of the Intellect, Soul, and World Soul.[50] And yet, despite the shifts in cosmological and cosmogonical thought, the basic Platonic problematic of a material world of time and flux in juxtaposition with an eternal world of forms problematized any view of worldly progression. In theory and in methodology, as Dodds summarizes, the great systematizers of this period—Galen in the sciences, Ptolemy in geography and astronomy, Papinian and Ulpian in Roman law, and Plotinus in philosophy—were men who "stood with their backs to the future"; for them, "all wisdom was in the past."[51]

To account for Ambrose's novel argumentation, we can suggest that, on one level, it was because he was writing in the self-consciously historical moment that he and his contemporaries would call *tempora Christiana*.[52] "Christian times" does

[46] E. R. Dodds, *The Ancient Concept of Progress and Other Essays on Greek Literature and Belief* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973) 1–25.

[47] Ibid., 15.

[48] Ibid., 23.

[49] John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists: 80 BC to AD 220* (rev. ed.; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996) 47–48.

[50] On the "demise of the demiurge" in Plotinus, see Carl Séan O'Brien, *The Demiurge in Ancient Thought: Secondary Gods and Divine Mediators* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 290–303. For further studies on the complex relationship between Neoplatonism and nature, see *Neoplatonism and Nature: Studies in Plotinus' Enneads* (ed. Michael Wagner; Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002); and *Neoplatonism and the Philosophy of Nature* (ed. James Wilberding and Christopher Horn; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[51] Dodds, *Ancient Concept of Progress*, 23.

[52] Ambrose, in fact, uses this phrase at *ep.* 72.10: Dignum ergo est temporibus vestris hoc est

not here name a kind of self-confident presumption that fourth-century Christians were now, sanctioned by Constantine, "in charge." What is meant here is something along the lines of what Frances Young has described as a "new kind of apologetics" in the fourth century, one in which Christian intellectuals reinterpreted the past to appropriate the best of Hellenic culture and literature into the comprehensive culture of Christianity.[53]

The Christian reinterpretation of the past included an account of how Christ not only prefigured the great wisdom of the past but also recapitulated it. Christ brought to completion or "summed up" the wisdom of former ages, which to a certain extent entailed an account of progress in history. Irenaeus may be the most famous proponent of recapitulation, but Tertullian and Cyprian likewise employed a grammar for speaking of the ways in which a *reformare ad melius* was at hand.[54] So, on the one hand, Ambrose highlights and extends these understandings of the way in which Christ improved the world order. But on the other hand, his view was more radical. It was also more than simply the product of a so-called Christian view of history overcoming a Greek view—the triumph of a "horizontal" linear view of time overriding a "vertical" emphasis on eternality.[55] The Ambrosian view of history triangulates with new modes of understanding creation and providence, which were in turn influenced by refined distinctions of the God-world relationship emerging from pro-Nicene theology.

The first homily of the *Hexameron* demonstrates this twofold pattern: first to distance creation from any necessary or essentialist relation to the divine, and second to resupply the link through an account of the divine will, chiefly expressed in christological language.[56] Ambrose begins his discourse with a polemical edge,

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Christianis temporibus (CSEL 82/3:16; *Ambrose of Milan* [trans. Liebeschuetz] 66–67). On *tempora Christiana*, see Robert A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1970); and idem., "*Tempora Christiana* Revisited," in *Augustine and His Critics: Essays in Honour of Gerald Bonner* (ed. Robert Dodaro and George Lawless; London: Routledge, 1999) 201–13.

[53] Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997) 74.

[54] For the relevant texts in the pre-Augustinian Latin tradition, see Gerhart B. Ladner, *The Idea of Reform: Its Impact on Christian Thought and Action in the Age of the Fathers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959) 132–52.

[55] While space does not permit such an exercise here, it would be profitable to compare the account of Ambrose's view of history given here with recent revisionist approaches to Eusebius of Caesarea's (in)famous "triumphalist optimist" notion of history, as found in, e.g., Aaron Johnson, *Ethnicity and Argument in Eusebius' "Praeparatio Evangelica"* (OECS; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 237–39, and Hazel Johannessen, *The Demonic in the Political Thought of Eusebius of Caesarea* (OECS; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) 139–70. If my argument holds, one should find a difference in the way Eusebius narrates the arrival of Constantine's reign as a certain kind of progress as compared to Ambrose's apologetic arguments against Symmachus. Regardless, Johannessen shares the underlying assumption that one's politics and ecclesiology are interdependent with one's view of history and salvation (*Demonic in the Political Thought*, 139).

[56] Ambrose, *Hex.* 1.1–4 (*Sancti Ambrosi Opera: Pars Prima* [ed. Carolus Schenkl, CSEL 32/1; Vienna: Temsky, 1896] 3–4; also, *Saint Ambrose: Hexameron, Paradise, and Cain and Abel* [trans.

surveying the divergent Greek cosmogonies before displaying the superiority of the divinely inspired Moses.[57] Plato and his pupils upheld three first principles—the divine, the forms, and matter—whereas Aristotle had posited only two—form and matter. Pythagoras maintained that there was only one world; others, like Democritus, had suggested multiple worlds. Plato had posited that the world had a distinct origin but will always exist; others held that the world did not always exist and will one day cease to exist. Some said the world was itself God, containing the divine mind within it; others said God was in parts of the world. "How is it possible to arrive at an estimate of the truth amid such warring opinions?" Ambrose asks.[58] Moses, who had learned the wisdom of the Egyptians, removed himself from all earthly cares, and given himself to divine contemplation, could provide the answers.[59] Ambrose deliberately distances the biblical view from the demiurgic conception of creation.[60] The creator in Genesis 1 is "not one who imitates matter under the guidance of some Idea, from which He formed His work, not in accordance with His will, but in compliance with a self-proposed model."[61] God did not need to wait for a later "pupil" to come along and fashion a world out of the contemplation of these forms. Rather, God is both author and creator. Moses attests to the idea that "the substances of things visible and invisible were contained in the divine mind."[62]

Ambrose offers additional contestations to the view that God and the world are coeternal. He explains the world as a temporally bounded entity, with a finite beginning and end.[63] The creature, he says, is bestowed with "infirmity" so that the creature is not mistaken to be unoriginate, uncreated, or "partaking of the divine essence."[64] He amasses a number of biblical passages that describe the bounded world as the creation of an eternal God (Isa 40:12–13, 22–23; Jer 10:11–14). At the outset of his homilies, then, Ambrose is concerned first to distance the biblical view of creation from the philosophers' views, which too easily could lead to a belief in two eternal principles—coequal in time and status.

So far, Ambrose's view accords with the earlier Christian view of creation ex nihilo, which originated from apologetic contexts in the writings of Justin, Tatian, and Theophilus,[65] and which furthermore took shape in various anti-gnostic campaigns

John J. Savage; FC 42; Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1961] 3–5).

[57] A thorough account of Ambrose's cosmological concerns and influences in the opening sections of the *Hexameron* is provided in Jean Pépin, *Théologie cosmique et théologie chrétienne (Ambroise, Exam. 1, 1–4)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1964).

[58] Ambrose, *Hex.* 1.1.4 (CSEL 32/1:4; FC 42:4).

[59] Ibid., 1.2.6 (CSEL 32/1:5; FC 42:6).

[60] He will clarify later, in contradistinction to the Platonic demiurge, that God is not just a "designer of their form" but "Creator of their nature" (*Hex*. 2.1.2 [CSEL 32/1:41; FC 42:46]).

[61] Ibid., 1.2.5 (CSEL 32/1:4–5; FC 42:5).

[62] Ibid., 1.2.7 (CSEL 32/1:6; FC 42:7).

[63] Ibid., 1.3.10–4.12 (CSEL 32/1:9–10; FC 42:10–11).

[64] Ibid., 1.3.8 (CSEL 32/1:8; FC 42:8).

[65] See Gerhard May, *Creatio ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of "Creation out of Nothing" in Early Christian Thought* (trans. A. S. Worrall; London: T&T Clark, 1994) 150, who credits Tatian as

and would be transmitted to later generations through Augustine's various writings on creation. Ambrose will soon, however, introduce the christological component of this doctrine of creation, and here the pro-Nicene emphases come into sharper relief. Commenting, as Basil had done, on the various senses of the word "beginning"—temporal, numerical, or foundational—Ambrose notes that the word "beginning" is also applied to the "power of God," not only in the sense of creating the world temporally (in the beginning), numerically (in a certain order), and foundationally (through providing a set structure), but also in a "mystical sense" to refer to Christ.[66] Based on pivotal texts in the Nicene controversies—John 8:25; Prov 8:22; John 1:3; Col 1:15—Ambrose is led to understand Christ as "the beginning" (*principium*) referenced in Genesis 1, who "in a moment of His power made this great beauty of the world out of nothing, which did not itself have existence and gave substance to things or causes that did not themselves exist."[67]

Ambrose soon employs other christological arguments to undergird this doctrine of creation, making careful distinctions between creation's relation to God and the Son's relation to the Father. Drawing on Heb 1:3 (Christ as "the brightness of the glory of his Father and an image of his substance"), Ambrose offers the typically pro-Nicene account of the Son's imaging of the Father as a relation of closeness rather than difference: "If you are seeking after the splendor of God, the Son is the image of the invisible God. As God is, so is the image. God is invisible; then the image also is invisible."[68] Ambrose distinguishes the world from Christ by closely linking Christ to the Father. The world is not the shadow or splendor of God; it evinces no essential participation in God. Rather, creation is the product of God's artistic creative action in the Son. The Son alone is the radiance or splendor of God, and the world the object of his creative work, sustained by the divine will. Ambrose will later complement this picture with pneumatological aspects of the divine creative activity (particularly in explicating the Spirit's brooding over the waters in Gen 1:2).[69] Here, however, the pro-Nicene emphasis on the unity of substance relating Father and Son—as distinct from a unity of will, which links God and the world—propels an anti-traditional interpretation of the created order.

Having stressed the separation of God and creation, while asserting Christ as the "power and wisdom of God," Ambrose next dispels Greco-Roman notions of the earth as a self-sustaining entity—a logical consequence of affirming matter and the divine as two coeternal principles.[70] In contrast to notions of a world suspended

"the first Christian theologian known to us who expressly advanced the proposition that matter was produced by God." This was an idea implicit in Justin, who nonetheless still held to a demiurgic creation out of unoriginated matter.

[66] Ambrose, *Hex.* 1.4.15 (CSEL 32/1:13; FC 42:14–15).

[67] Ibid., 1.4.16 (CSEL 32/1:14; FC 42:16).

[68] Ibid., 1.5.19 (CSEL 32/1:15; FC 42:17).

[69] See ibid., 1.8.29 on the Spirit's work in creation.

[70] Ambrose writes: "Certainly not without reason do we read that the world was made, for many of the Gentiles who maintain that the world is co-eternal with God, as if it were a shadow of

upon elemental matter such as air or water, Ambrose offers instead the simplicity of the biblical position that creation is held by the power and will of God. For in the words of Job, "[God] hangeth the earth upon nothing" (Job 26:7).[71] It is not a purely natural law that sustains the world; it is not even sustained by "number, weight and measures" (Wis 11:21).[72] For the creature does not give the law but receives it; the "majesty of God holds the world together by the law of his own will."[73] Though the world may appear to human beings as immovable, it is so only by the *voluntas Dei*, not by necessity or by the power of its own nature. After amassing an array of biblical texts affirming that the earth is sustained by nothing other than God's power and will (Job 38:4–6; Ps 103:5, Ps 74:4), he concludes:

> Let others hold approvingly that the earth never will fall, because it keeps its position in the midst of the world in accordance with nature. They maintain it from necessity that the earth remains in its place and is not inclined in another direction, as long as it does not move contrary to nature but in accordance with it (*contra naturam non movetur, sed secundum naturam*). . . . I [however] believe that all things depend on his will, which is the foundation of the universe and because of which the world endures up to the present moment.[74]

For Ambrose, the world does not endure because it possesses infinite or eternal qualities. It endures because the divine will sustains it. The pro-Nicene grammar afforded to Ambrose, following Basil, enables him to distinguish relations of nature (Father and Son) and relations of will (the divine and creation), which could be used to counter Greco-Roman cosmologies. Ambrose can thus articulate a clear distinction between God and creation, while also avoiding the view that the earth is somehow self-sustaining or self-governing. The will of God—Christ—governs and sustains the world through its intimate involvement.

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divine power, affirm also that it subsists of itself. Although they admit that the cause of it is God, they assert that the cause does not proceed from His own will and rule. Rather, they make it to be analogous to the shadow in respect to the body. For the shadow stays close to the body and a flash follows the light more by natural association than by exercise of free will" (Ambrose, *Hex.* 1.5.20 [CSEL 32/1:16–17; FC 42:17]).

[71] Ibid., 1.6.22 (CSEL 32/1:18; FC 42:21).

[72] Ibid. On this significant feature in Augustine's doctrine of creation, see Augustine, *Gen. litt.* 4.3.7, and for scholarship see W. J. Roche, "Measure, Number and Weight in St. Augustine," *New Scholasticism* 15 (1941) 350–76; Carol Harrison, *Beauty and Revelation in the Thought of St. Augustine* (Oxford Theology and Religion Monographs; Oxford: Clarendon, 1992) 101–10.

[73] Neque enim creatura legem tribuit, sed accipit aut servat acceptam. Non ergo quod in medio sit terra, quasi aequa lance suspenditur, sed quia majestas dei voluntatis suae eam lege constringit (Ambrose, *Hex.* 1.6.22 [CSEL 32/1:18; FC 42:21]).

[74] Laudent alii quod ideo nusquam decidat terra, quia secundum naturam in medio regionem possideat suam, eo quod necesse sit eam manere in regione nec in partem inclinari alteram, quando contra naturam non movetur, sed secundum naturam. . . . sed omnia reposita in eius existimo uoluntate, quod voluntas eius fundamentum sit universorum et propter eum adhuc mundus hic maneat (ibid. [CSEL 32/1:20; FC 42:22–23]). Later he will reaffirm: "The word of God gives nature its power and an enduring quality to its matter, as long as he who established it wishes it to be so" (ibid., 2.3.10 [CSEL 32/1:48; FC 42:53]).

Having argued against Greco-Roman conceptions of the coeternality between God and the world, Ambrose immediately runs into difficulty with the second verse of Genesis 1, namely, that "the earth was void and without form," which he takes up in the second homily.[75] The past tense of the verb "was" seems to suggest—contrary to what he has just argued—that matter (*hylē*) is in some sense eternal, which was then formed by God in demiurgic fashion. Ambrose explains that matter could not have preexisted, because there would have been no "where" for it to be. Any spatial residence for the world to exist would also need to have been created at some point in time. Instead, Genesis describes a twofold stage of development, whereby God first made and then beautified the world. Responding then to the question of why God did not beautify the world instantaneously, Ambrose answers that although God could have created in this way, Scripture reveals a developmental origin to the world to show that the world was created (and not eternal) and also to reveal God as both the creative and ordering power of creation—that is, to guard against a conception that one divine being created and another beautified.[76] A developmental view of the world here protects the unity of God as both creator and fashioner of matter.

Summarizing the arguments made in the first two homilies, Ambrose wonders over the creation of the universe:

> Who, therefore, does not marvel at the fact that a world formed of dissimilar elements should rise to the level of unity in one body, that this body should combine by indissoluble laws of concord and love to link together and form a union of such discordant elements? . . . All these elements a divine power incomprehensible to human minds and incapable of being expressed in our language has by the might of His will woven closely together.[77]

The picture presented here closely coheres with the argument given against Symmachus (*ep.* 73.23) about the two-stage development of the world as primary witness to the progress of all things. In the *Hexameron*, while Ambrose is not targeting the obsolescence of Roman religious rituals, he does have in view the various alternative non-Christian cosmologies.

[75] Ibid., 1.7.25 (CSEL 32/1:23; FC 42:26).

[76] Ambrose writes: "Scripture points out that things were first created and afterwards put in order, lest it be supposed that they were not actually created and that they had no beginning, just as if the nature of things had been, as it were, generated from the beginning and did not appear to be something added afterwards. . . . God created first and afterwards beautified, in order that we may believe that He who made and He who adorned were one and the same person. Otherwise, we might suppose that one adorned and that another performed the act of creation, whereas the same person achieved both, creating first and afterwards adorning, in order that one act might be believed as a result of the other" (ibid., 1.7.27 [CSEL 32/1:25–26; FC 42:29]).

[77] Quis ergo non miretur dissimilibus membris disparem mundum in corpus unum adsurgere et insolubili concordiae caritatisque lege in societatem et coniunctionem sui tam distantia conuenire, ut quae discreta natura sunt, in unitatis et pacis vinculum velut individua conpassione nectantur? aut quis haec videns, possibilitatem rationis infirmo ingenio rimetur? quae omnia vis divina inconprehensibilis humanis mentibus et ineffabilis sermonibus nostris voluntatis suae auctoritate contexuit (ibid., 2.1.1 [CSEL 32/1:41; FC 45–46]).

A final theme featuring developmental motifs in the *Hexameron* emerges in the fifth homily (*Hex.* 3.6–17), where Ambrose speaks of creation's natural progression as a figuration of human growth. Commenting on Gen 1:11 ("Let the earth bring forth the green herb after its kind"), Ambrose demonstrates various instances in which vegetative life signifies the Christian life. Taking examples from the natural world mentioned in other passages of Scripture, Ambrose uncovers the Christian mysteries hidden in the orders of creation. For example, he describes "the fertility of the earth," which "carries into effect its age-old fecundity by exercise of spontaneous growth"—a teaching from nature that promotes the work of providence, not human effort, as the agent bringing in the kingdom of God, a teaching confirmed in Jesus's parable of the seed growing into a great tree even though the sower has gone to sleep (Mark 4:26–27).[78] Likewise, he shows that the grafting of a barren fig tree onto a productive tree mystically signifies the conversion of the Gentiles to the Christian faith, cautioning Christians against shunning outsiders.[79] Another example occurs when, reflecting on the kinds of evergreen trees that maintain their "vesture" even in the harsh seasons, Ambrose counsels: "Imitate the palm . . . so that it may be said also to you: 'Thy stature is like a palm tree'" (Song 7:7).[80] In these examples, Ambrose seeks to cultivate in his hearers a sensibility towards the world that reveals how human life attains to God. In each case, the natural developments in the created order provide the fodder for reflecting on the biblical and moral principles of growth in Christian virtue.

This is not to say that human beings will of necessity grow into Christian maturity by a law of nature. Ambrose does not suggest that the Christian life mirrors nature in a way that is devoid of grace. In fact, he takes the failure of humans to grow into Christ-likeness by nature as a result of how deeply sin has rendered human life idiosyncratic from nature. How is it, he asks, that if each plant produces fruit "after its own kind," human beings, made in the image and likeness of God, do not correspond to their proper kind? "The green herb corresponds to its kind. You do not correspond to your kind. When a grain of wheat is scattered over the soil it returns the gift of its kind; but you degenerate."[81] Ambrose takes this disjuncture as an opportunity to survey a litany of heretical beliefs about Christ, showing why it is important to teach that Christ is God and humans the work of Christ (*opus Christi*).[82] Manichaeans teach that the creator of humans was a different god than the creator; Photinus, in a different way, disavows that Christ was involved in the construction of the world; and Eunomius says that Christ is unlike the Father. Only in the pro-Nicene position, in which Christ's imaging of God does not entail

[78] Ibid., 3.10.46 (CSEL 32/1:89–90; FC 42:101).
[79] Ibid., 3.13.55 (CSEL 32/1:97–98; FC 42:110).
[80] Ibid., 3.17.71 (CSEL 32/1:108; FC 42:121).
[81] Ibid., 3.7.31 (CSEL 32/1:80; FC 42:91).
[82] Ibid., 3.7.32 (CSEL 32/1:80; FC 42:91).

a dissimilarity of substance, is there the possibility that human beings may be restored to a genuine likeness of God.

For Ambrose, in sum, there is an implicit but significant connection between creation's relationality to God and christological precision. The picture of creation that emerges in the *Hexameron* is one in which creation is clearly distinct from God yet is also closely linked by the power of the divine will, chiefly expressed through Christ, the consubstantial image of God. As creation is understood to be the work of the Christ who is consubstantial with the Father, there is a simultaneous strengthening of the ontological gap between the divine and creation and a breaking down of the spatial distance between the "true God" and that which he has made. This doctrinal development prioritizes creation's nonnecessity, its graced or willed existence, and renders more plausible—against the predominant Platonic assumption of a preexisting, stable matter—a creation that advances or develops. Such a conception of "progress" in the created order, in turn, coalesces with accounts of human growth in virtue. The possibility of progressing in sanctity is of a piece with a creation that is, by grace, being turned toward God.

Excursus: Ambrose among the Pro-Nicenes

It is worth noting, before coming to a conclusion, how Ambrose's views of creation fit within the context of other pro-Nicene creation theologies. While this cannot but be a cursory sketch of other positions, it will offer at least some context for understanding the intellectual environment in which Ambrose operated. It is well recognized that the debates sparked at Nicaea between Arius and Alexander soon became an all-encompassing flame that touched nearly every aspect of Christian doctrine and practice—from baptismal liturgies and theologies of salvation to conceptions of creation and theological epistemologies.[83] To be sure, the question of how an eternal God relates to a temporal creation had long been at the forefront of Christian reflection. Yet, as Paul Blowers notes, when the church had recourse to an ontologically mediatory role for the Son/Word, it answered these questions differently than when, after Nicaea, pro-Nicene bishops eradicated subordinationist language for the Son and stressed the strict ontological gulf between creator and creation.[84]

The attention to creation came into focus at least as early as Athanasius's polemics with a so-called Arianism that, he argued, would rob God of the title of creator. Since his opponents also granted that Christ was creator, if Christ were excised from the divine essence, this would entail that "God" is not, properly speaking, a creator. For "if there is no Son," Athanasius asked rhetorically, "how then do you say that God is Creator, if indeed it is through the Word and in Wisdom

[83] This is the basic premise of Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011).

[84] Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy*, 142–43.

that everything that is made comes to be?"[85] By clearly separating creator and creature, and locating the creative activity in the trinitarian essence, Athanasius facilitated a theological grammar that founded the generative aspects of creation, which are related to God by will, on the fundamental generation of the divine Son, related to God essentially. As Khaled Anatolios comments: "For Athanasius, . . . the Father-Son relation, which is constitutive of the actuality of God's generative and creative capacity, grounds, precedes, and supersedes the willed relation between God and the world. The fecundity of the act of creation . . . is grounded in the fecundity of the generation of the Son."[86] For Athanasius, in other words, there is a close connection between how one configures the Father-Son relation and how creation exhibits its developmental and fecund qualities.

In the Hexameral writings of Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa, there is a similar emphasis on how a pro-Nicene theology of the creative divine word configures an understanding of the generativity and dynamism of creation. In both of these figures, however, a more overtly pedagogical emphasis adheres. For the Cappadocian brothers, as for Ambrose, creation is a wondrously diverse work of art that manifests the divine Artist.[87] And yet this Artist is explicitly not a sub-divine or mediating divinity but the consubstantial Son of the Father. As a result, created being unfolds in a twofold manner—first an invisible, spiritual realm, followed by a sensible creation that becomes, Basil says, a gymnasium of the soul. This latent developmental structure in creation, with its capacities for growth and decay, is what funds the possibilities of training in virtue.

> But it was necessary that the rest [of sensible creation] and this world be brought into existence, first of all as a place of instruction and a school for human souls, and second as a suitable dwelling place for all things that come to be and corrupt. Therefore, the passage of time is bound up with the world, and with animals and plants that live in it—time, always pressing on and flowing, never stopping its course.[88]

For Gregory of Nyssa, likewise, the changeability and mutability of creation, far from constituting an Origenist fall from an eternally immutable realm, is the very possibility for growth in human virtue—the epectasy of ever-increasing desire for the divine.[89] Both Cappadocians view attentiveness to creation, which bears the

[85] Athanasius, *C. Ar.* 2.2 (*Athanasius* [trans. Khaled Anatolios; ECF; New York: Routledge, 2004] 111).

[86] Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 118.

[87] Basil writes in *Hex.* 1.11: "Let us glorify the best Artisan for what has been wisely and skillfully made. From the beauty of visible things, let us contemplate him who is beyond beautiful" (*Basil of Caesarea* [trans. Stephen Hildebrand; ECF; New York: Routledge, 2018] 101).

[88] Basil, *Hex.* 1.5 (Basil of Caesarea [trans. Hildebrand], 96).

[89] For example, Gregory of Nyssa in *De Perfectione* writes: "Let no one be discouraged who sees in human nature the penchant for change; rather, changing in every way for the better, 'transforming from glory unto glory' (2 Cor. 3:18), let him or her turn so as by daily growth to become ever better, constantly perfecting himself or herself, never arriving too soon at the limit of perfection. For this is precisely what perfection is: never to cease from growing toward what is greater or to set any

immediate presence of a nonetheless infinite God, as charting a course between apophatic Homoian theologies, on the one hand, and Eunomian epistemological certainties, on the other.[90] What is offered instead are renewed possibilities for glorifying God through sensing the presence of the triune mystery revealed in the created order.[91]

A final point of contact for situating Ambrose's views of creation is Augustine's notion of the *rationes seminales* (see *Gen. litt.* 6.14.25–17.29). As Rowan Williams notes, this difficult-to-define concept in Augustine was a product of reflection on God's creation in contrast to demiurgic models of creation. Since creation was not the imposition of form on preexisting matter, it can instead be described, as Williams puts it, as "the setting in being of a living system destined to grow toward beauty and order, even if this beauty and order is not at any given moment fully apparent."[92] The *rationes seminales* thus name a way of describing the "latent powers of development in created things," but which are not simply reducible to natural processes: "The *rationes* do indeed contain the potential in things for natural development, but they also specify the ways in which things in the world may be acted upon by God."[93] Williams contrasts this understanding with the deterministic way in which Plotinus used a similar but more Stoic-infused concept (*Enn.* 3.1.7 and 2.1). For Augustine, the *rationes* are not independent of God's will and involvement, but they do contain generative and formative processes within them. Thus the temporal character of creation, Williams says, is axiomatic for Augustine. His view of creation promotes an appreciation for the dynamic, time-filled ordering and flourishing of the natural order.

Ambrose has not generally been recognized for having achieved the clarity of expression that one finds in Augustine. And his dependence on Basil, furthermore, has prevented his account of creation from receiving much direct attention.[94]

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boundary around perfection" (quoted in Blowers, *Drama of the Divine Economy*, 148).

[90] Homoian theologies, such as that prominent at the Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia in 359, resisted the pro-Nicene language of *homoousios* on account of its nonbiblical origin and the fact that human reason was incapable of understanding the mystery of divine generation. Eunomian, or heterousian, theologies—identified with Eunomius of Cyzicus and Aetius—presented a different challenge to pro-Nicenes: they held that one could in fact comprehend the divine origin, and the Son and Father were of decidedly different essences (*hetero-ousia*). A brief account of these approaches can be found in Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 133–49.

[91] Ayres notes two features that mark Basil's text as characteristically pro-Nicene: first, "a strong emphasis on presenting the creation as revelatory of the Triune God's infinite power"; and second, the semiotic or figural character of creation. He concludes: "Things in the world are both mysterious in their nature and only truly approached when seen as reflecting the God who ordered them and is mysteriously present in them" (Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 317).

[92] Rowan Williams, "Creation," in *Augustine through the Ages* (ed. Allan Fitzgerald; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 251–54, at 252. See also idem, "Good for Nothing? Augustine on Creation," *AugStud* 25 (1994) 9–24; Simon Oliver, "Augustine on Creation, Providence, and Motion," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18 (2016) 379–98.

[93] Williams, "Creation," 252.

[94] Moreover, while Ambrose's *Hexameron* was well received in the later Middle Ages, it generally

Nonetheless, despite idiosyncrasies, there are enough family resemblances in Ambrose's account and those of other key pro-Nicene figures that warrant consideration of how this pattern of thinking might have spurred developments in other areas of thought—in this study, Ambrose's apologetic writing against Symmachus. While more could be said in order to validate these comparisons, I hope to have shown that developments in theological controversies can resonate in seemingly unrelated disputes. For Ambrose, an ordered account of creation as distinct from God nonetheless admits an intimate involvement via the divine will, the result of which is an appreciation for the generativity and fecundity of creation.

Conclusion

The point of expounding Ambrose's *Hexameron*, again, is not to suggest its originality to Ambrose or to imply that its writing had any immediate bearing on the Altar of Victory controversy. The purpose, rather, has been to situate Ambrose's apologetic tactics amid emerging modes of imagining creation and cosmology. In terms of the implications for scholarship, this argument suggests that those historical dynamics that are primarily seen as cultural or political (Ambrose's apologetic against Symmachus) are not unrelated to territory that is primarily under the purview of theologians or historians of doctrine (Trinitarian theology). In coming to grips with a figure as complex as Ambrose, it will not help to siphon these areas off as distinct spheres of inquiry. While social or cultural historians may worry that theology on its own insufficiently narrates the complexities of historical reality, the reverse is also true: if theological developments are neglected, we risk losing a fuller picture.

With the kinds of arguments Ambrose makes in the *Hexameron* in view, I have tried to show how we might better understand the rather cursory arguments he makes against Symmachus, which at first seem so novel in comparison with earlier apologetic strategies. Whereas Symmachus had offered a fairly traditional account of history, in which divine providence in the course of future events would be maintained through the continuity of antique religious practices, Ambrose seems to dismiss the entire project with one stroke. However, the arguments that come across as rash or flippant in the apologetic treatise against Symmachus are made plausible in part due to deeper transitions in pro-Nicene theological polemic. The new attention to nature and history that is more fully expounded in the later *Hexameron* is previously at work in funding the critique of Roman religious custom in *ep.* 73. The world, held together by the power of divine will and not necessity, is now free to evolve, change, and progress, without any threat to the stability of God's providence. As an apologist for the Christian faith, Ambrose has recourse to a new theological imaginary, one that will hopefully bolster his nominally Christian audience to remain firm against Symmachus's eloquent appeals to tradition.

went unnoticed in the early Middle Ages (see Michael Gorman, "From Isidore to Claudius of Turin: The Works of Ambrose on Genesis in the Early Middle Ages," *REAug* 45 [1999] 121–38).

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