

# The Generation of the Soul

*There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots. -Esaiah 11:1*

## I. Background

Where does our soul come from? Did our parents conceive a lifeless corpse which was immediately infused with a soul created by God? This is the "creationist" view in reference to the soul and the one most prevalent in the modern Christian West. Yet many are surprised to learn that historically creationism was not the only dominant view in the Latin Christian West. Nor has it never been the primary view of the historic Christian East.

The historic alternative to creationism is known as "generationism." Generationism teaches that rather than our parents giving us a body alone, our entire existence is generated from them. Thus our soul too is generated from our parents as an integral part of the humanity they pass on to us. It is believed that our body and soul are generated together and given us from our parents. This view is sometimes referred to as "traducianism" being derived from the Latin word "tradux" meaning "a branch or shoot." Some writers make a distinction between the traducianism and generationism. Others use the terms interchangeably as I will be doing in this treatise.

This ancient, biblical understanding of the generation of man is explained by the third century Latin writer, Tertullian. He writes that "the substances of both soul and body are formed and propagated together" from the parents (1). The term "traducianism" was utilized to describe this doctrine because of the familiar lines in Holy Scripture which refer to children as "off-shoots" or "branches." Messianic prophecies also utilize this terminology in reference to the Christ's human lineage (2). In the New Testament our spiritual rebirth and new status as children of God are described in similar terms (3). Such language points to the belief that our experience of being "re-generated" or "born again," is similar to our original generation, only now spiritual.

Byzantine Orthodox Father Thomas Hopko, Dean Emeritus of St. Vladimir Orthodox Seminary, elaborates on this historic teaching in several of his lecture series (4). Fr. Thomas roots the belief in generationism in the Eastern Christian understanding of "generational sin:"

"We actually inherit our life from our parents, literally. We do not have a teaching of infused souls. We believe we receive our psyche, our mental state, our soul, with our body and its connected to our body. You cannot act spiritually unless you have a brain. And we know for sure nowadays, for example, that if people are raging, depressed, bitter and unhappy they have different chemicals in their brain than other people. So when crazy, hysterical, unhappy people have children, they pass on brain chemicals to them that makes them have a propensity (what the Greeks call prolepsis), a predisposition to be bitter, angry, unhappy and crazy. If they're born HIV positive, if they're born with congenital heart disease, if they're born atheistic and blasphemous, you're going to be infected by that from your birth and its even going to show in your genes. Because we are

not, as Fr. Florovsky used to say, "*ghosts and corpses.*" We are *incarnated beings*. Our minds and our bodies are organically connected. And its all infected and poisoned by the sins of the parents, by the generation."

## **II. Reasons for belief in Generationism**

As Fr. Thomas Hopko explains above, according to Eastern Christian theology, the humanity we receive from our parents is not just damaged or affected by original sin "physically" or bodily. Rather, we have the potential of being affected by original sin in every possible way which pertains to our humanity. These effects are passed on from not only our first parents, Adam and Eve, but also from all of our forefathers, including our own parents. The effects can be obvious things like diseases, genetic malformities, chemical imbalances, chemical dependencies, and addictions. But this sin we receive from our forefathers, referred to as "generational sin" by Eastern theologians, can also affect us spiritually and psychologically. Things like strong inclinations to lust, homosexual attractions, a violent tempers, etc., are examples as well as other strong inclinations to sin.

Yet there is a positive side to the belief in generationism as well. Our parents and forefathers can also pass on a better, holier humanity to us as well. Fr. Hopko gives examples of many families which were blessed with several saints as a result of the God-given holiness passed on from their parents. The greatest example of this reality of overcoming generational sin through the Grace and Divine Energy of God, is Sts. Anna and Joakim who passed on their holy humanity to their daughter, St. Mary the Immaculate Mother of God. This is not to say that we are bound to to obey the passions of the humanity our parents pass on to us. It simply means that we are given a certain "prolipsis" or predisposition by our parents, for better or worse, which each one of us have to deal with in this life. This, again, is because we receive our entire humanity from them.

One may wonder why belief in the generation of the soul is so intertwined with belief in the transmission of original sin? This is explained if we consider that we receive original sin from our parents, and that this "sin" affects our entire humanity (body and soul). It follows then, that what we inherit from them is not merely a "soma" or body but rather that this inheritance is "psychosomatic" involving body and soul. Otherwise, if each of our souls were directly created by God and we simply received our bodies from our parents, it would follow that only our bodies would be affected by original sin, since it is from them that we derive this as well. Yet it is obvious that our souls too are affected by original sin. Therefore it is logical to conclude that we receive our souls too from our parents.

How else can we explain our reception of a soul riddled by sin? If we adopted the creationist view, we must say it is God who infuses us with souls damaged by original sin. This would be heretical because we know God is All-Holy, nothing unclean or sinful dwells with Him and everything He creates is good. Generationism gives a satisfactory explanation to why our entire humanity is affected by sin.

It is important to remember that this belief, as the name "generationism" implies, does not mean that our souls are "created" from our parents, as some mistakenly think. The most simple way to understand this point is by considering the other creatures of this world. They too have

souls because they are living. The Latin word "anima" from which the word "animal" is derived means "a living being." Animals have souls because they are living. Yet God does not directly infuse their souls. Nor do their parents "create souls" for them even though they receive everything they have from their animal parents. We know that "in the beginning" God created everything. Now all His creatures "pro-create." So in generationism, humans are still considered to be created in the image and according to the likeness of God. God created our first parents and they, in turn, passed on that same humanity to us, only in a fallen, mortal state. It is also significant to recognize, as Fr. Thomas points out, in Scripture man is said to bring forth children after his own likeness (5). This speaks to the parental transmission of our entire humanity without any indication that God reserves the ongoing creation of our souls for Himself.

It must also be pointed out that such an understanding of the reception of our soul does not in any way diminish our relationship with God. All life is from Him, and certainly nothing is pro-created without his knowledge and consent. In the generationist view, our body, soul and spirit are just as sacred as in the creationist view because we are still His unique and special creatures.

### **III. Other Arguments:**

“In support of generationism is the observation that Gen. 1:27 represents God as creating the species in Adam to be propagated "after its kind" (cf. Gen. 1:12, 21, 25). And this increase through secondary causes is implied in the following verse (cf. vs. 22; 5:3; 46:26; John 1:13; Heb. 7:9-10) and in the passages which suggest the solidarity of the race and its sin in the first man (Rom. 5:12-13; I Cor. 15:22; Eph. 2:3). Traducianism, therefore, in which God's relation to individual conception and birth is held to be mediated, has had from the third century wide support” (6).

Another reason for belief in generationism is the fact that it has fairly strong Patristic support, especially in the Christian East. The Latin Father Saint Jerome substantiates this. He writes that, in his day, "the majority of Oriental writers think that, as the body is born of the body, so the soul is born of the soul" (7). The Catholic Encyclopedia notes that "Gregory of Nyssa, Macarius, Rufinus, Nemesius... seemed to prefer generationism." It is also known that "Gregory the Theologian, Gregory of Nyssa, Saint Macarius of Egypt and others, taught that both substances -soul and body- receive their beginning and are perfected simultaneously: The soul is created from the souls of the parents, just as the body is created from the bodies of the father and mother. In this way, the parents participate with God in the creation of life”(8). There are also other Fathers like St. John of Damascus who in reference to the Theotokos wrote: "O most blessed loins of Joachim from which came forth a spotless seed! O glorious womb of Anne in which a most holy offspring grew" (Homily I in Nativ. c. A.D. 749). Such statements make good sense in the context of the generation of the soul.

It is also important to note that generationism is historically not just the dominant view of the Byzantine Orthodox East. It is also the historic belief of the ancient Non-chalcedonian Oriental Orthodox East as well. For example, among the “errors” which the Latin Pope Benedict XII ordered the Armenian Orthodox Church to reject, as a condition for restored communion, was the “the doctrine that the soul originates from the soul of the father” (9).

In the West, early Latin writers like Tertullian advocated this view. The great Latin Father, St. Augustine, too was sympathetic toward this belief. In fact, it wasn't until the rise of Latin Scholasticism in the middle ages that the West began preferring creationism over traducianism. In spite of this, some writers of the West still support it.

**In behalf of Traducianism it was said by the Fathers:**

1. that it offers the best theory for the whole human race having been affected by the "Sin of Adam";
2. that it is supported by the analogy of lower life in which numerical increase is obtained by derivation;
3. that it teaches that parents beget the whole child, body and soul, and not just the body; and
4. that it was necessary for Christ to have received his soul from the soul of Mary in order to redeem the human soul (10).

**Thus, to summarize, the reasons for belief in the Generation of the Soul are the following:**

In favor of traducianism:

1. God's breathing into man the breath of life is not said to be repeated after Adam (Gen. 2:7);
2. Adam begat a son in his own likeness (Gen. 5:3);
3. God's resting (Gen. 2:2-3) suggests no fresh acts of creation ex nihilo (out of nothing); and
4. original sin affects the whole man, including the soul; this is simply accounted for by traducianism (11).

Footnotes:

- (1) H. D. McDonald: Man, Doctrine Of, Elwell's Evangelical Dictionary
- (2) Jeremiah 23:5-6; Zechariah 3:8-9; Zechariah 6:12; see also: 1 Mc 1:10; Psalm 127(8); Wisdom 4:1-6, Ecclesiasticus 3:27; 23:25, Daniel 11:6-7; Hosea 14:5-7, etc.
- (3) St. John 15:1-7; St. Paul to the Romans 11:16-24
- (4) cf. "God and Gender?" and also "Sin: Primordial, Generational, Personal" SVS Press
- (5) Gen 5:3
- (6) H. D. MCDONALD: MAN, DOCTRINE OF, ELWELL'S EVANGELICAL DICTIONARY
- (7) (Epist. cxxvi, 1)
- (8) Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia:  
<http://home.it.net.au/~jgrapsas/pages/abortion2.htm>
- (9) *The Catholic Encyclopedia, Volume XV* Copyright © 1912 (Denzinger, 533)
- (10) M. E. OSTERHAVEN, SOUL, ELWELL'S EVANGELICAL DICTIONARY
- (11) J. S. WRIGHT, TRADUCIANISM, ELWELL'S EVANGELICAL DICTIONARY