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Gregory Palamas and Christian Social Theory

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Abstract

The construction of any theology is a secularization, which is necessary, but risks distorting the distinctive experience that birthed it. Gregory Palamas holds that Christian morality must be based in asceticism. The mediation of Christ, conceived as a

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series of reconciliations, requires participation in the divine energies through a life of repentance.

Keywords

Gregory Palamas, Reconciliation, Social Theory, Church and State, Political Theology

1 Introduction

In part one of what follows, I will share some philosophical and historical reflections on Christian social theory in the context of secularization.

In part two, I will offer specific observations on Gregory Palamas's thought. I will contend that Christian social theory must be moral. That it must argue from the is, which is the revelation of God in Christ, to what ought to be. That Gregory holds that the moral is inseparable from the ascetical. Efforts to create mediating moral languages need always to be measured against individual witness.

The implications of this are that the Church must practice virtue and not just talk about it and that Christian witness without a commitment to asceticism runs the risk of losing its distinctiveness.

In the end, the Christian life is not just about what we ask of others but about what we ask of ourselves.

2 Some Philosophical and Historical Reflections on the Construction of Christian Social Theory

Religion begins with a personal experience of what Rudolf Otto called simply, the numinous.[2] That primitive experience of awe and reverence in the presence of the totally other is not primarily an experience of dread or fear. Paradoxically, there is an attraction to the unknown, a familiarity of the other that draws the individual into a relationship in which she feels herself suddenly in communion. She is part of some larger scheme. She transcends her isolation and experiences the social in its most basic form. The experience is at once personal and public because it is relational and multivalent.

Secondary efforts to represent that experience are part of the construction of a religious system, which might include a political theology.[3] Ritual, symbol, and the development of a language of theology all follow. With the process comes a transformation. The experience takes on a less unique form. It moves from epiphany to elocution. The epiphany is an experience, ringed off by a mystic fire. The elocution is vulgar, in a common language. The experience is sacred; the theological expression is not. In this way, it can be said that all theology has a built-in secularity. This secularization is beneficial to society and represents one of the key contributions of religion.

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2 Rudolf Otto, *Das Helige* (Breslau: Tewendt & Granier, 1917).

3 The term "political theology" is not used to suggest, as it is often done today by those still influenced by Marx, that all theology is reducible to the "political." Nor do I mean to imply a religion that becomes merely a tool for supporting the state, or what some refer to as a "civil religion." I have largely avoided the term "political theology" for those reasons, but use it here to mean "a theology about politics," or a "Christian social theory." Here I wish to emphasize that theology as well as other religious expressions is involved in the process I am describing.

René Girard explains the formation of a modern judicial system which is an example of this dynamic of the secularization of primitive experiences. For Girard, the judicial system is the result of the process of secularization and rationalization of the dynamics of sacrifice. By vindicating the absolute monopoly of legitimate vengeance, the state completes the process begun by ritual sacrifice, rationalizing and developing greatly its effectiveness. Rather than trying to stop vengeance, the legal system rationalizes it. It turns it into an extremely effective technique of healing and of preventing violence.

This is an effective secularization that benefits society and perpetuates the sacred instinct. Religion is not hindered by such secularization, rather it is benefited. It gives its life for the good of society. It sacrifices itself by secularizing sacrifice and saves itself while saving others. The great religions of the world all do this. The cult or new religious movement often cannot do this; it is too interested in creating a unique identity, in setting itself off from the rest of the world; but that is not what makes it live long like celibate Shakers who never could shed their faith in their peculiar institutions of celibacy and because of that set themselves off from the rest of society so well that only three of them are left in the world today.

Violence, theology, and law are linked in a process of secularization. Should law try to break that linkage, as it does in the case of legal positivism, it becomes arbitrary and capricious. Should theology try to break it, it becomes fundamentalist, cut off from all warrants other than its own assertions.

The mystical dimension of religion will try again and again to distance itself from theology. It refers back to the more primitive moment and rejects the limits placed on it by theology. Yet it is only an aporia, lasting for a moment. It cannot live without secularization. If it tries to, it remains wholly mysterious, wholly other, inarticulate, crude, silent.

Theologies, because they are social, secular expressions, can be matched to political forms. Mystical experiences cannot. The state can easily endorse the theological enterprise but always remains wary of the mystic. The mystic may also be the prophet, if he speaks forth in a sufficiently primitive language that differentiates itself from the secular theology of the church or the state. The mystic cannot be coopted by the state. The theologian often is. Today we are no longer in the age of Caesaro-papism, so the cooption might not be obvious. Yet it occurs, coming through conception of human rights or individual liberties.

The concept of human rights could well be seen as being grounded in a Stoic, but much more deeply, in a Christian conception of the uniqueness and dignity of the human person. Marx rejected any conception of universal rights as bourgeois values that must be ignored in the construction of a new society because they were only props of the existing structures of suppression. Yet Marx is not alone in his effort to decouple human rights from the Christian conception of the person, as today's political fights about certain putative human rights illustrate.

How does Christianity allow itself to be secularized for the good of society and its own good? What are the pitfalls it must beware?

At its core is the question of how we move between an experience of God and public morality. This is a problem for any religion, but especially for Christianity. In the New Covenant, little attempt is made to give specific directives for the myriad of situations life might bring. The New Covenant is not the Torah, nor is it Sharia, which start with the attempt to form a comprehensive code of morality and social action. Of course, even in those highly-detailed systems, situations arise which are not explicitly addressed, and theologians must extrapolate

the moral principles as best they can. In Christianity, that process begins much sooner. Christians are presented with far fewer directives. Rather we are told that the "law" of the Spirit of life in Christ has set us free from the "law of sin and death" (Romans 8:2), the Mosaic law, which functions to show us our need for God's mercy, but never in itself brings freedom. Christians are forced, at least in part, to rely on the development of moral protocols, accessible to all through reason, especially when it comes to ordering society.

Christianity has a long history of this, one that began as early as the second century with the work of Origen. In the West, by the Middle Ages that tradition had taken on a highly-developed, carefully-nuanced form, represented most elaborately by the scholastic tradition. That tradition relied on Aristotelean definitions about the world as it was observed without the aid of any special grace. By so doing, all of society could be addressed. A path between the dictates of reason and the world of revelation could be forged. It was an important accomplishment, a project that brought with it an integration of the society, a holistic vision of being, arranged logically and in reference to the Almighty. Yet it carried with it certain dangers. God could be obscured in the maze of syllogisms and fine distinctions that populate the pages of St. Thomas. The prophetic dimension of Christian witness could be distorted. The dynamism of Spirit could be trapped in a static system.

Such objections were not lost on Thomas's contemporaries. In 1277 the Archbishop of Paris Étienne Tempier issued a condemnation of scholasticism, specifically castigating Thomas. He wished to clarify that God's absolute power transcended any conditions of logic that Aristotle or Averroes might place on it. More specifically, he listed 219 propositions held by the scholastics that violated the omnipotence of God, and included in this list were twenty specifically from Thomas. This was a

clear effort to stem the excesses of scholasticism, which insisted the theology was a science, bound by the same Aristotelian definitions and rules that governed the secular sciences.

Tempier's rebuke, although it had some effect in its day, soon faded. The forces that wanted a mediated science of theology that was compatible with the existing social order and its legal structures won decisively. In 1323 Aquinas was canonized, and from then on the hegemony of Thomism was unquestioned. In 1879 as part of his attempt to resist the modernist impulse in his church, Pope Leo XIII in his letter, *Aeterni Patris*, made explicit the church's reliance on Thomistic theological method, insisting that it be taught in all Catholic theologates worldwide, largely to the exclusion of other systems. This was an ironic twist that Thomas who had done so much to spur the development of secularization by his theological method was then used as a bulwark against it.

This is explainable partially by the development of still more secularized models of the political order introduced by Machiavelli, Hobbes, and their progenies. Just how much should Christians labor to translate their morality into the political order? What must that translation involve? Is some version of a natural law ethic required that emphasizes the accessibility of God's moral demands through reason?

It is no accident that historically the emergence of scholasticism and its triumph coincided with the emergence of powerful Christian regimes in Europe, which insisted on their own legitimacy apart from the church. In an era when the relation between a powerful papacy, which at times claimed *plenitude potestatis,* the Church's relation to powerful regimes was fraught. Scholasticism proved an invaluable aid in translating the prophetic, evocative language of religion into the legalistic, regulatory jargon of statecraft. Just as Gothic architecture was born in the nexus of state power and Christian devotion, so too

was scholasticism. The edifice of St. Denis, the first Gothic cathedral, spoke of the power of the French kings and of the Church. Over the bodies of Clovis and his heirs soared Abbe Suger's magnificent clerestory that created a heaven of its own, perhaps more beautiful than the unadorned nature's night sky, which, once entered might be so pleasing the one would never wish to escape.

Yet, unlike nature's heaven, entrance into the church's heaven was only through a well-regulated door, kept by the priests, bishops, and monks. Your experience of transcendence depended on their rules, their definitions and distinctions, which divided religious experience as carefully as medieval architects divided space.

The Christian natural law tradition is not, of course, limited to Thomas, but has had many Protestant proponents as well, among whom is Hugo Grotius. In his 1624 work *De juri ac pacis*, he uses the phrase *etiamsi daremus Deum non esse*, "even if we were to accept that God does not exist." Some scholars have seen this as a turning point toward a secular moral system based on reason but without any specific reference to God. Oliver Donavan is almost certainly right to see that reading of Grotius as an exaggeration, but doubtless there were those in Grotius's day and many more today who do not. [4]

With Protestantism, the historical context of a Christian social theory took different directions, which in part, made it more adaptable to the secular state.[5] The Reformation represented a

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4 Oliver O'Donovan and Joan O'Donovan, eds., *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), p. 788.

5 See Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How A Religious Reformation Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012).

turn to the individual and concern for personal salvation. The emphasis on the individual was matched by a focus on the question of justification. The term itself is legalistic and comes from the Jewish concepts of law with which St. Paul struggled in his letters to the Romans and Galatians. Luther spoke of the concept of alien righteousness, attributed to us in a juridical transaction, whereby God looks on the righteousness of Christ who stands in our place.

We are *simul justus et peccator.* The dichotomies of justice and mercy become the heart of Protestant theology. Given that, it is no wonder that beginning in the early twentieth century, as a response to the excesses of industrialization, the category of "social justice" enters Protestant theological discourse with thinkers like Walter Rauschenbusch in the U.S. and Reinhold Niebuhr. The early social gospel movement was grounded in religious experience. Rauschenbusch started a small group of Protestant ministers in New York City who met for prayer and the reading of saints like Francis of Assisi and Martin de Porres. Niebuhr similarly led a movement to return the church to witness rather than politics.

But the 1970s saw the birth of a theology that attempted to reconcile Marxist ideas about the economy and culture with Christian social concerns. It was concerned with experience, but it was the experience of the poor and oppressed as a class, not as individuals. Their material suffering was the locus of God's action. They suffered not through choices of their own, but through the evil of the socio-economic system. They did not choose to witness to the Gospel but in their experience of oppression they did. They were "the least of my brethren" that Christ had described (Matt. 24.40). The response of Christians should be to fight against the material structures that inflicted that oppression. Witness in that model meant social action, not acts of self-denial and prayer. Moreover, it meant having an

awareness of the political dimensions of society. It was not enough to give alms, to reach out personally to aid the poor. Believers should enter the political process and fight, even to the point of violent revolution, for the structural changes necessary. In Latin America, the Boff brothers and Gustavo Gutiérrez explicitly claimed that Marx's harsh critic of religion and embrace of violent revolution was part of the dialectic of history. In North America, Black theologians like James Cone used similar strategies to explain the struggle of Black American Christians.

Alien righteousness can change the moral imperative for Christians. The person never really partakes of the divine nature, she is only allotted a measure of it in the juridical transaction that explains salvation. The political counterpart of this is that personal holiness is not important. What counts is the juridical, social transaction. Praying and practicing ascetical actions as part of a life of repentance is not enough to change society and help the poor. The political process ultimately holds the key to societal salvation. The individual Christians works are de-emphasized. Her will to choose is all that is required, indeed all that she can ever provide. Repentance can be seen as a choice, that once made, need not be repeated. Christian witness about the structures of society leads to social change, like creating greater fairness or economic equality, but that change does not require that persons change to become like Christ.

In this model, it is hard to see what is distinctive about Christian social action. It seems to share with Marxism the claim that all that is required is the right political action, which Christians must bring about as citizens, not as believers. The secular state enacts new policies because they are believed by a majority, or by the revolutionary elite, to be better for the political community. In such a model, it is hard to see how the

Church is any different from other political actors. Its power to effect social amelioration is limited to its political effectiveness.[6]

In the East, there is a long tradition of thought about church-state relations. We can think of Nikephorus Blemmydes, who lived a century before Gregory and came to prominence in the courts of Nicaea. His *Andreas Basilikos* is an explication of the emperor's role in Christian society. The king is the foundation of society, and as such he should be given to philosophy and the practice of virtue. A century later, just as the political power of the Byzantine rulers waned, the Eastern Church officially embraced Palamism. Gregory triumphed in his dispute with Barlaam. Yet the Church in the East never let go of the medieval comprehensive view of church-state relations. The Church had a preeminent place in society and deserved a special status in the law and procedures of the Christian state. Palamism in Gregory's hands was not an explicit rejection of the concept of *symphonia* with its strong, pre-Hobbesian suppositions about a Christian prince.

Symphonia does not survive the secular state, nor should it. So the challenge is to appropriate Gregory's thought into the modern world. My project is to suggest that Gregory offers a corrective to much of the Christian social justice industry and those who easily bandy about the term "political theology" the dimensions of which I have only suggested in this brief historical survey but which are not unfamiliar to any of us. The project is ambitious for the reasons suggested and also because it relies on an experience that is aporetic. But such aporia are at the heart of our Christian faith.

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6 See Leszek Kolakowski, "Marxism and Human Rights," in *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 204-14.

3 Gregory's Christian Witness

Gregory, of course, is not known for his social theory. Although he was for a while the bishop of a large city, his writings never show much concern for the structures of society. His writings come out of his monastic experience and are suffused with his never-ending quest for an experience of Christ and a simple insistence on witnessing to that reality through acts of charity.

Maximus the Confessor thought that the reconciliation Christ worked had five elements, which he referred to as mediations: between male and female, paradise and earth, heaven and earth, sensible and intelligible creation, and God and the whole of creation. Gregory Palamas adopts this tradition, insofar as he insists that the restoration of society and the full development of the human person in society is finally brought about through the action of God, just as knowledge of heavenly things is a work of God we must experience, rather than simply deduce by means of syllogistic reasoning.

The reconciliations of which Maximus speaks can be brought about, for Gregory, only through the work of Christ. In the words of Paul, whom Gregory revered as "the Great Paul, the mouth of Christ:" [7] "For it pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell. Moreover, having made peace by the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things, whether they be things in heaven or earth" (Col. 2:20). To be reconciled here means to be thoroughly transformed (*apokatallatto*). Paul again in II Corinthians: "If any man be in Christ: a new creation. Old things are passed away; and behold, all things become new. Moreover, all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus

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7 *One Hundred Fifty Chapters*, c. 82.

Christ, and hath given us the ministry of reconciliation" (II Cor. 5:17-19).

Gregory claims that repentance is necessary for us to participate in this life of reconciliation. He quotes Maximus saying that Moses and David became fit for the divine energy by laying aside their carnal properties. They became living icons of Christ, a process that takes place more by grace than by assimilation.[8] Now that the kingdom of God in Christ has drawn near, we must not remove ourselves from it by living an unrepentant life. Rather, Gregory tells us, "let us acquire works of repentance: a humble attitude, compunction and spiritual mourning, a gentle heart full of mercy, loving justice, striving for purity, peaceful, peacemaking, patient, glad to suffer persecutions, losses, disasters, slander and sufferings for the sake of truth and righteousness."

This is not merely an ascetical formula followed by moral maxim. It is an exhortation to love, based on an experience of love. He continues: "For the kingdom of heaven, or rather, the King of heaven—O the unspeakable munificence!—is within us."[9]

This experience is all possible because we have been created in the image of God, which image has been restored in the Reconciliation. The divine nature possesses goodness essentially and transcendentally. Transcendent goodness is Mind, from which the Word proceeds by way of generation. The Spirit and the Word proceed from Mind, and the Spirit is the love of the Begetter for the begotten Word.

This triadic image is in angels and men, but man is more perfectly the image of God, because of his corporality. The

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8 Ibid., c. 76.
9 Ibid., c. 57.

person is thus always body and soul. There is no need to escape corporality as a burden that hinders the soul. The mind need not leave the body to be with God. In fact, the body can help the mind to pray, through the recitation of prayer, through kneeling, fasting, etc. A reconciliation can occur between mind and body. The body then can even, in the saints, be a source of grace to others, as it is with the wonder-working relics of the saints.

Because of this reconciliation of mind and body, the created material order becomes part of God's plan, and care for it becomes part of man's duty in his ministry of reconciliation.[10] Stewardship of creation is thus an obligation, not because we are part of pre-existing created essences or ideas in the creation. Creation is *ex-nihilo*. Creation is not the created energy of God or the uncreated; creation is that which is acted upon by God.[11] The human person is a superior creation that stands between heaven and earth to beautify both. Our souls are supra-heavenly in their natures, though not in space.

However, men and women destroyed likeness with God by disobedience. The only way back to reconciliation is through the gift of God offering us deification through a free collaboration (*synergia*) between the divine energy and human efforts. The fellowship of the soul with the divine energy is *theosis.* The henotic moment, which Gregory stresses, requires our cooperation, our *kenosis.* It is only accomplished through a constant struggle for perfection.

So here the ascetical imperative is tied to the moral quest. As we strive for perfection, we are transformed into partakers of

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[10] E.g. *Triads* 2, 2.12, cited in: Gregory Papademetriou, *Introduction to St. Gregory Palamas* (Holy Cross Orthodox Press: Brookline, MA, 2013), p. 103.

[11] *Triads* 1, i, 3, cited in Papademetriou, p. 117.

the divine nature, that is, his energy, not his essence. This transformation includes, as it did for the Beloved Disciple, the mandate that we love others. "The love for our brothers is the basic evidence of our genuine commitment to Christ and therefore or our salvation."[12]

It is telling that Gregory's most comprehensive work of theology, *One Hundred and Fifty Chapters*, is subtitled *"on topics of natural and theological science, the moral and ascetical life, intended as a purge for the Barlaamite corruption."* The sections dealing with the moral life are, as the title suggests, linked to the ascetical. This linkage while obviously not unique to the Archbishop of Thessalonica, remains his hallmark. There simply is no interest in this text, or in any of his homilies, in presenting a secular ethics. There is nothing resembling natural law theory here. The good life is the life of repentance and striving to purify our souls so that we may experience the Taboric light. As we know from his own life, this is not a simple notional concept of assent. There is nothing like an Evangelical decision for Christ that results in our assurance of salvation or even of a Rahner or Fuchs like a fundamental option. No. We must pray without ceasing. Through the Jesus Prayer, the mind (*nous)* enters the heart and there participates in God. We are never passive participants. We are never saved because we are simply part of the elect or of a class. Gregory's emphasis is not on whether or not we are justified but on our entering really and repeatedly into the presence of Christ in our hearts.

This is illustrated by Gregory's appropriation of Gregory of Nyssa's idea of *epektasis*. The perfection that the soul seeks is

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12 Sermon 4, PG151, Col.44, in: Papademetriou, p. 101.

inexhaustible because it is rooted in the infinite nature of God. As Palamas puts it:

> "And this is why the great Macarius said a single ray of this intelligible sun – even though he himself did not see this light as it is in itself, in its full extent, but only to that extent that he was capable of receiving. By this contemplation and by this supra – intelligible union with this light, he did not learn what it is by nature, but he learned that it really exists, is supernatural and super-essential, different from all things; that its being is absolute and unique, and that it mysteriously comprehends all in itself. This vision of the infinite cannot permanently belong to any individual or to all men. He who does not see understands that he is himself incapable of vision because he is not perfectly conformed to the spirit by a total purification, and not because of any limitation in the object of vision. But when the vision comes to him, the recipient knows well that it is that light, even though he sees but dimly. He knows this from the impassable joy akin to the vision which he experiences from the peace which fills his mind and the fire of love for God which burns in him."[13]

But then note the link to the ascetical:

> The vision is granted him in proportion to his practice of what is pleasing to God, his avoidance of all that is not, his assiduity in prayer and the longing of his entire soul for God. Always he is borne on to further progress and experiencing even more resplendent contemplation. He

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13 *The Triads,* 3, 22, 23, in: John Meyendorff, ed., *Gregory Palamas: The Triads* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), p. 39.

> understands then that his vision is infinite because it is a vision of the infinite."[14]

It seems that good deeds that come from that experience have to be different from those that come because from some political theory about social justice. Certainly, the two things are not mutually exclusive. However, they are profoundly different. Motivations and awareness matter. Christian witness is not simply being on the right side of history. It is not measured by its success or by its popularity, or even by how it conforms to positive law, especially in an era when claims to "human rights" increasingly include claims to moral practices long condemned by Christians.

This inward transformative experience brings forth the external practice of compassion and good works in the life of the believer. In his Sermon on the Parable of the Second Coming, Gregory offers a straightforward commentary on Matthew 25:37-39. Those who neglected the corporal works of mercy show their hatred for Christ by ignoring their brethren who are sick, poor or imprisoned. We must be merciful and show loving deeds toward our brethren. Only then will we inherit Christ's everlasting kingdom.

So social change may occur as a result of Christian actions, but there is no substitute for individual action that comes from repentance. Charity is the fruit of conversion. Social change remains rooted in individual moral transformation that always is centered on an experience of the divine that has entered our heart and reconciled us to God, to others, and to the created world.

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[14] Ibid.