On God's Death

An Orthodox Contribution to the Problem of Knowing God

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We are now assured that the death of God 'theology' has already become *passé*. It has been weighed and found wanting. All the way from its recent origins in the Theologische Hochschule in Berlin, trying to adopt a methodological atheism in response to Bonhoeffer, down to the challenging absurdities of William Hamilton and Thomas Altizer, the movement seems to have helped merely to raise again some old questions about the issue of our faith in God.

The movement is really more significant than the theological establishment is willing to concede. For it marks the final spasm of the Western intellect trying to deliver itself from the paralysing grip of its basically corrupt Augustinian tradition of theology. The Death of God movement is not simply the flower or even the ripe fruit of the Reformation and the Renaissance. It marks the last effort of Western Christianity to react against a costly deviation in Western Christian thought, stemming from Augustine of Hippo, and pervading both the Catholic and Protestant forms of Western Christianity. 1789 was the year of the beginning of the real protest within Western Christianity, not 1517. When the French monarchy collapsed, bringing down with it the landed aristocracy and the established Church, then began not only the questioning of Theodore Van Leeuwen's ontocratic principal,[1] but also the dethronement of theology from the intellectual tradition of the West.

It is significant indeed that no Christian theologian figures prominently in the intellectual tradition of the West since the time of Luther and Calvin. Such German giants like Schleiermacher, Ritschl and Harnack do not occupy a position of prominence in the average Western intellectual's heritage—not to speak of contemporary German and Swiss giants like Barth,

[1] The ontocratic principle implies the identification of God with the cosmos and finding the manifestation of this God in the league between throne and altar or state and religion. Martin Luther himself basically followed this principle in his 'as Ruler, so Religion' policy.

Brunner and Bultmann. Kierkegaard might very well have been an exception, but then was he a theologian?

In a very brilliant recent article, Harvey Cox affirms that the Death of God movement signals the dead end for a certain type of theologizing characteristic of the West. He now wants 'to move away from any spatial symbolization of God and from all forms of metaphysical dualism'. He is 'trying to edge cautiously toward a secular theology, a mode of thinking whose horizon is human history and whose idiom is political in the widest Aristotelian sense of that term, i.e. the context in which man becomes fully man'.[2]

Cox wants to avoid, in the course of this cautious advance, certain traps. He regards as deadly both 'the mystical-atheistic monism of Thomas Altizer', 'the uncritical empiricism of Paul van Buren' and the 'inverse pietism of William Hamilton'.

As two possible lights to illumine the forward path, Cox proposes Teilhard de Chardin and Ernst Bloch. They both affirm the responsibility of man for shaping creation—which previously used to be all God's work. We human beings were, in that kind of theology, just the creation and He, God, was the Creator. This won't do for the future. We now cannot evade our responsibilities as men by projecting everything onto the transcendent. Human beings have more than a passive role in the shaping of creation.

In fact both Teilhard and Bloch contend that the pressure of the transcendent is the pressure of the future which breaks into the present. Reality is an open-ended process, in which man lives by hope. Teilhard lives toward the point Omega. For Bloch, a Messianic Marxist, man is 'man-as-promise', and his concern is with 'the ontology of the not-yet', which in more complex terms is called Futurology or Zukunftwissenschaft.

Bloch, of course, is not a Christian theologian. He is a Jew and a Marxist philosopher. His Christian counterpart, Jürgen Moltmann, owes his *Theology of Hope*[3] to Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*.[4]

Cox's final conclusion is that the God of the future is to be sought neither 'up there' nor 'out there' but 'ahead'. God *is* not, but it is 'He who *comes*'.

An Eastern Qualification

The death of the God of Western theology, if it does lead to the resurrection of a 'God who comes', would not be such a bad thing—for the God who comes is the God of the Old

[2] Harvey Cox, 'Death of God and Future of Theology' in William Robert Miller, Ed., *The New Christianity*, New York, 1967, Delta Edition, pp. 382-383.

[3] *Theologie der Hoffnung*, Munich, second edition, 1964.

[4] *Das Prinzip der Hoffnung*, published 1954.

Testament, who is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ—'the God who came', who was and is and is yet to come.

The new attempt to limit God, however, to a God of the future alone cannot find whole-hearted approval from the Eastern tradition. He is. He was. He will come. Nothing less than that will do for the authentic tradition.

Living towards the future was all right for the children of Israel. Even they had constantly to look back to the past when he had done great things. It is on the basis of the past that we look forward to the future. But for Christians who believe that the 'coming one' was already in history and is now, a theology of hope can only be a *corrective* to a static theology, but not an adequate *substitute* for it.

Here perhaps an Eastern theologian has no option but that of Christian forthrightness. The Eastern theologian has to say that the Augustinian tradition of mapping the God-man-world relationship was fundamentally wrong and that, without radically questioning that tradition, there is no way forward for the West to find an adequate theology.

The fourfold distortion of Christian thought, for which Augustine and not merely the Augustinian tradition must accept major responsibility, can only be summarized here.

(*a*) The distortion stems primarily from a failure to take the incarnation sufficiently seriously—a failure which characterizes Western theology throughout its history, even in the new theology of hope which is not squarely founded on the *fact* of the Incarnation, but only on a *promise*.

Augustine could say with impunity about our seeing Christ: 'It is better that you do not see this flesh, but picture to yourselves the divinity'[5] or again:

'There is one thing that is transitory in the Lord, another which is enduring. What is transitory is the Virgin birth, the Incarnation of the word, the gradation of ages, the exhibition of miracles, the endurance of sufferings, death, resurrection, the ascent into heaven—all this is transitory . . . whoever desires to understand God the word, let not flesh suffice them, because for their sakes the word was made flesh, that they might be nourished with milk.'[6]

(*b*) As a consequence of this low doctrine of the Incarnation, Augustine has a low doctrine of Man. Man can do nothing of himself. This view comes up again and again in the Reformed and Lutheran traditions. Whatever he does on his own is *eo ipso* wrong and sinful:

'Man is not anything of such kind that, having come into being, he can as of himself do anything rightly, if He who made

[5] Sermon CCL XIV:4, Eng. tr. Erich Przywara, *An Augustine Synthesis* (Harper Torchbook, 1958), p. 294.
[6] *In Ps.* CIX : 5 ; *In Ps.* CXVII : 22, *op. cit.*, pp. 292-293.

him withdraws Himself from him, but his whole good action is to turn to Him by whom he was made, and to be made just by Him, and pious and wise and happy.'[7]

It is precisely this childhood dependence on God that modern 'secular theology' derides in the name of a world come of age. Man has to accept responsibility for the world and live as if God did not exist. That idea would be completely contrary to Augustine's view, which holds that only by conscious dependence on God Man can become something. This Augustinian notion which seems to undervalue man in the name of God has provoked the protest from the 'enlightened' reason of Western culture. The Augustinian ideal of man as God wants him is a beggar:

'A beggar is he who ascribeth nothing to himself, who hopeth all from God's mercy. Before the Lord's gate he crieth every day, knocking, that it may be opened unto him, naked and trembling, that he may be clothed, casting down his eyes to the ground, beating his breast. This beggar, this poor man, this humble man, God hath greatly helped . . .'[8]

(*c*) Thirdly, Augustine places too much of a polarity between Jerusalem, the city of God, and Babylon, the city of the earth.

Babylon is the creation of man in his love of the world. Babylon is a flowing river where nothing is permanent. 'It flows, . . . it glides on; beware, for it carries things away with it.'

But Jerusalem—'O holy Sion, where all stands firm and nothing flows! Who has thrown us headlong into this (Babylon)? Why have we left thy Founder and thy society? Behold, set where all things are flowing and gliding away, scarce one, if he can grasp a tree, shall be snatched from the river and escape. Humbling ourselves, therefore, in our captivity, let us "sit upon the rivers of Babylon"; let us not dare to plunge into those rivers, or to be proved and lifted up in the evil and sadness of our captivity, but let us sit, and so weep.'[9]

And that attitude is precisely what modern theology reacts from—the refusal to plunge into the flowing waters of time, there to be involved in the torrent of politics and economics. We have been brought into Babylon in order that we may plunge, not in order to sit and weep or to grasp a tree and escape into a heavenly Jerusalem. Jerusalem has penetrated Babylon—that is what the Incarnation means. But Augustine wants static Jerusalem and rejects flowing Babylon. Augustine's idea of the two cities comes up in Western theology in so many different forms—nature and supernature, or nature and grace,

[7] *De Genesi ad literam* VIII xii : 25, 27, *op. cit.*, pp. 306-307.
[8] *In Ps.* CVI : 14, 15.
[9] *In Ps.* CXXXVI : 3, 4, *op. cit.*, p. 269.

world and church or state and church, law and gospel, the two kingdoms of Lutheranism and so on. This basic dualism of Western theology lies at the root of the secular reaction today. Modern man cannot accept a flight from the world of time into the unchanging immobility of heaven as the basic framework for life.

(*d*) Fourthly, Augustine's soteriology was focused too strongly on the individual man and his salvation from sin as concupiscence. True, Augustine had a great deal to say about the body of Christ and the corporate character of Jerusalem and the Church.

His diagnosis of the problem of man, however, was primarily in terms of personal sin—sin being understood as the desires of the flesh, the love of Babylon, the city of the earth.

The secular theology of our times is primarily concerned with man in his corporate existence, as city man, as national man, as world man. The sins that we are more preoccupied with are those of society—war in Vietnam, race, economic injustice and so on. Individual sins, especially 'sins of the flesh', are viewed rather lightly by the secular culture which currently shapes our theology. The Eastern theologian here does welcome the corporate emphasis of secularist theology, but wonders if we are not overdoing the demythologization of personal sin.

(*e*) A fifth weakness of Augustine, which in a way pervades his whole system of reasoning, lies in the Manichean tendency to regard matter and therefore the body itself as somehow evil in themselves, or at least as not having any good in them.

'Leave then abroad both thy clothing and thy flesh, descend into thyself; go to thy secret chamber, thy mind. If thou be far from thine own self, how canst thou draw near unto God? For not in the body but in the mind was man made in the image of God.'[10]

On account of the same Manichean tendency, he tends to evaluate even the sacraments as somehow inferior to the pure word (which he regards as invisible and, therefore, higher than the *verbum visibile*).

Contemporary theology demands a higher evaluation of the body, of matter and therefore of technology and culture. But Augustine has laid the foundations for regarding culture as something 'spiritual' as opposed to material.

Towards Applying an Eastern Corrective

It is not possible to discuss a so-called Eastern doctrine of God except in relation to the vexing questions of God-world and God-man relationships.

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[10] *In Joan. Evang.*, XXIII, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

We shall here do something—for the sake of convenience—which is contrary to authentic Eastern Orthodox practice, i.e. to isolate certain particular Fathers of the Church as authority for teaching.

A more balanced Eastern Orthodox doctrine would require an historical treatment of the Cappodocian Fathers, through Maximus the Confessor, John Damascene, Gregory Palamas, Vladimir Soloviev, and contemporary theologians like Evdokimov, Schmemann and Nissiotis. Here we have to attempt something less ambitious, limiting ourselves largely to the fourth-century Fathers of Cappadocia.

These fourth-century fathers are as modern as the twentieth century in the breadth of their imagination and in the scope of their 'secular' knowledge. To cite just one illustration, here is a passage from St. Gregory Nazianzen:

'Now since we have established that God is incorporeal, let us proceed a little further with our examination. Is He nowhere or somewhere? For if He is nowhere, then some person of a very enquiring turn of mind might ask, "How is it then that He can even exist?" For if the non-existent is nowhere, then that which is nowhere is also perhaps non-existent. But if He is somewhere, He must be either in the universe or above the universe. And if He is *in* the universe, then He must be either in some part or in the whole. If in some part, He will be circumscribed by that part which is less than Himself, but if everywhere (in one universe), then by something which is further and greater—I mean the universal which contains the Particular, if a universe is to be contained by the universe, and no *place* is to be free from circumscription. This follows if He is contained in the universe. And besides, where was He before the universe was created, for this is a point of no little difficulty. But if He is *above* the universe, is there nothing to distinguish this (above) from the universe, and where is this *above* situated? And how could this Transcendent and that which is transcended be distinguished in thought, if there is not a limit to divide and define them? Is it not necessary that there shall be some mean—to mark off the universe from that which is above the universe? And what could this be but space, which we have already rejected? For I have not yet brought forward the point that God would be altogether circumscript, if He were even comprehensible in thought; for comprehension is one form of circumscription.'[11]

Now, after having read that if anyone accuses our ancient fathers of believing naïvely in a three-story universe or a spatially located God, it shows only how ignorant, naïve and misinformed we moderns are. It was clear to the fathers not

[11] Gregory Nazianzen, *Second Theological oration*, X, Eng. tr. in *Nicene and Post-nicene Fathers*, Series 2, Vol. VII, p. 292.

only that God was not intellectually comprehensible. He was not to be comprehended in any way whatsoever.

If one abandons these two fundamental poles of patristic thought, namely that there is no way to conceive God intellectually or to locate God spatially, our theology is bound to become shallow.

Any kind of qualification or predication that we dare to apply to God is in the form of symbols—ways by which we can chart our own relationship to the ultimate reality that we call God.

Once this basic incomprehensibility of God is grasped, we can seek to conceptualize His relation to us and the world in symbolic ideas, which are actually the creations of our minds, but which help us to become related to God and to His universe. The theology offered here, therefore, is already predemythologized. It should be taken symbolically, evocatively, rather than conceptually, descriptively.

Gregory of Nyssa[12] suggests three possible ways of knowing God, by concept (*jnānamārga*), by obedient devotion (*bhaktimārga*) and by ecstasy or mystic vision. But none of these can penetrate to the Divine Essence which remains in light unapproachable, beyond the reach of created intelligence. Only the *energies* of God are accessible to the created order, and any attempt to go beyond leads to 'Vertigo' (*hilligia*), to dizziness and to destruction. The only real knowledge of the essence of God possible to us is that it is unknowable.

But beyond our intelligence we can only conceive of 'nothing'. This 'nothing' or non-being is not the absence of being, but the 'unlimited, undetermined, pure potentiality of all being'. 'One does not really know God except in the awareness of the very incapacity to apprehend him.'[13] Thus the knowledge of God is a 'taught ignorance', a knowledge of our own limits. It is the knowledge of God's *non-being* (where being means determined existence).

The Freedom of God

Augustine was basically sceptical about human freedom. Freedom was necessary for him to explain the origin of evil without attributing it to God; but that freedom was not a great value in itself for Augustine.

For this Father of the Universal Church,[14] Gregory of Nyssa, however, there is no value higher than freedom, because it belongs to the very heart of God's (*meonic*) being. God's absolute transcendence is his freedom, his existence as un-

[12] I am grateful to Jerome Gäith, *La conception de la Liberté chez Gregoire de Nysse*, Paris, 1953, for many of the insights in this paper into St. Gregory's thought.

[13] See *contra Eunomium* I. 373.

[14] Augustine is not a father or doctor of the universal Church. He was never accepted by the whole Eastern tradition.

limited, undetermined, pure potentiality of all being. But not just his transcendence. His immanence is also an aspect of His freedom; because it is a free immanence, He is not dependent on that in which He is immanent. To quote Gregory himself: 'God, being the unique good, in a simple, non-composite nature, has His vision fixed on Himself, never subjects Himself to change by the impulsions of His will, but eternally wills to be what He is, and He is always what He wills to be.'

This should not be interpreted as mere immobility; there is no change necessary in His being, but he can initiate change. He is the perfection of all good, and there is nothing to be added to him; he *needs* no change. His will and actuality are always co-terminous. He is what he wills to be and he wills what he is. That will, however, is a dynamic will.

But in his becoming immanent, he initiates change. Matter itself comes from God and is 'in God'. It comes from spirit and is 'spiritual' in its essence, according to Gregory. This is an insight which accords well with modern physics, which regards all matter as charges of energy, rather than as simply composed of particles. Matter is not opposed to the spirit, but identified with it by St. Gregory.

The creation is an act in which God becomes immanent. so to speak, but without change. God's *ousia* or *nature* remains veiled, but it is His energy that becomes immanent in creation. The creation is neither a part of the divine *ousia* or nature nor is it an extension of or an emanation from him. It comes from His will, not from His being. In fact Gregory says that the creation *is* God's will and energy. It has no other being of its own.

The creation was set in motion by God's dynamic will. He established in the 'moment' of creation 'the principles, the causes and the dynamics' of all created existence, by an act of His will. The creation is thus God's will in concrete actuality—it is the 'substantification' of God's will. In his life of Gregory Thaumaturgus, Nyssa says:

> 'The divine will is so to speak the matter, form and energy of the world, and of all things in the world or above it.'[15]

If the universe is thus the will of God in concrete, God is immanent in it, not by *ousia* but by will. The will, with its dynamic energy, is the motor of the universe. Therefore the universe itself is dynamic—stretching forward to its own salvation, which is the completion and perfection of creation.

God and Man

In the God-Man relationship, Nyssa's conceptualization is very close to Plato and Plotinus, and therefore to Indian

[15] *PG.* XLVI: 920 A.

thought. He posits boldly a connaturality (*Sungeneia*) between God and the human (*Paramātmā* and *jivātmā*). 'God has made us not merely spectators of divine power, but participants in his nature.'[16]

But there is no identity here between *Paramātmā* and *jivātmā*. The latter is not even an emanation from the former. It is a mysterious communication of God's own being to man, which is best expressed in the formula: 'God created man in His own image.' But image, *eikon*, means more than mere resemblance. The *eikon* is the visible manifestation of an invisible reality. Jesus Christ the new man is the *eikon* of the invisible God. That is what man really is—the visible manifestation of God.

Man is therefore free—like God; potentially capable of all good, all wisdom, all power, all love. This is quite contrary to the Augustinian evaluation of the world and of man. For Augustine sin is the central category for understanding man. For Gregory it is man's freedom and his vocation to be in the image of God. The only differences between God and man in terms of potentiality are the two following:

(1) God is Himself the source of His being; man has no being in himself. His *ousia* is derived from God. God is creator. Man is creature.

(2) God is what he wills to be, and since he wills what he is, he is changeless: man is placed in the historical world of space and time and therefore of change. Man is not what he wills to be. He is not even what he *ought* to be. He has to become what he is, in a world of change. He lives towards the future. Man is in the throes of an alien power called sin and has to be liberated in order to be truly what he is—i.e. a participant in the divine nature.

That which distinguishes man from the rest of creation is his parentage—that he is born of God. His creation was not simply an act of God's will, it is the consequence of a deliberative decision—'let us make man in our image'. Man is constituted by the divine breath which was breathed unto him. In this sense God indwells man in a manner different from his immanence in creation which latter is entirely a matter of will. In man the divine breath is his constitutive reality, though he participates also in the creation by will, since he is made of the dust of the earth.

This man with the divine breath in him is the image of the creator, the *eikonic* presence of the invisible God. God made man in order to manifest Himself through him. The incarnation is only the fulfilment of the creation of man. In Jesus Christ,

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[16] *PG.* XLIV: 1137 B.

the true man, the purpose of God to manifest Himself through man is realized.

God thus indwells man. Gregory comes fairly close to the traditional Hindu understanding of the relationship between the *Paramātmā and the jivātmā.* Not that they are identical, but rather that the *jivātmā* is a mode in which the absolutely transcendent *Paramātmā* becomes immanent in freedom in the created order and manifests himself through his operations. It is also significant that for Gregory it is not just the soul (*jivātmā*) which is in the image of God. The body itself is part of the image and not something to be escaped from. So also we should note that the orientation of the *jivātmā* is not simply to recover its relation to the *Paramātmā.* The historical manifestation of the *jivātmā* has its own purpose—namely to reveal God in His creation, and to rule over the whole creation by His reasoning power and tool-making capacity.

But man becomes able to reveal God only when he is liberated and becomes free—i.e. one who by his own wisdom, love and power chooses and creates new forms of good.

The liberty itself can be obtained by faith, by self-discipline, by worship, and by working with one's own hands in order to serve others. Thus, in time, man manifests God in the process of the very struggle for liberation, in faith, worship, discipline and spirituality. But time itself is something from which we have to be liberated in the end. Death thus becomes the door to the Resurrection, where a new kind of freedom is experienced. The body, which has been such a drag on our liberty, now becomes reconstituted and participates in human freedom. The body of man was originally made by the hand of God. It is now to be restored to its original purity as it came from the hands of God.

Man thus truly becomes man in the Resurrection, participating still in the created order, integrating in himself truly the intelligible and the material worlds. That is the image of God as can be made present in the creation.

It is not then God's death that is the truth, but the Death and Resurrection of the God-Man Jesus Christ in which we are all called to share.

Gregory also insists that man's reasoning and tool-making powers constitute a major aspect of the image. Thus Gregorian theology has already anticipated the contemporary notion that science and technology are God-given instruments for man to gain control of his environment.

Gregory also knew that man had a double existence—in memory and hope. But memory and hope are never evenly balanced. This is man's basic asymmetry. The past is constantly receding, leaving only traces in the memory. Hope pulls man on, but he is afraid to move, because of his fears accumulated from past errors, from his fear of judgment and condemnation. Liberation from guilt and despair is what sets

him at liberty to move on towards his future.[17] Christ alone is both free and freeing by forgiving our sins and removing the fear of condemnation.

CONCLUSION

Classical theology is by no means inadequate to deal with the problems of contemporary humanity. Our mistake is to have been bedazzled by the intellectual and spiritual brilliance of Augustine and led to a dead end. The universal tradition of the Church, which Augustine by no means represents, poses no conflict between the interests of God and the interests of man. Man can become mature without parricide. It is that God of the authentic Christian tradition who needs to be made manifest in the life of the Church today.

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[17] Gäith, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

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