

Orthodoxy and the Gospels: Repositioning hermeneutics beyond nominalism

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What I should like to propose in this essay about hermeneutics, the Gospels, and Orthodoxy is strongly related to Panayiotis Nellas's idea, as expressed in his *Deification in Christ*, of how the «image of God» theme ought to be treated. I shall shortly come to a brief description of his approach to the subject. But, even at first glance and as we shall have the opportunity to see later on with more detail, the thematic connection between each of these terms ought not to be particularly surprising. To begin with, the Gospels have everything to do with the image of God and Orthodoxy is especially keen on bringing this fact to the fore. And, needless to say, deification is the crowning feature in theological vision offered in the apostolic writings as interpreted and developed in the teachings and liturgical practices of the Church, understood as implying an ever-developing Tradition. Nevertheless, with all these interpenetrating factors in view, Nellas's approach, and perhaps because it simply is a consistent Orthodox approach, is suggestive of how contemporary hermeneutics may be repositioned, once it succeeds in shedding its implicit bond with phenomenology and Protestantism.¹

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¹ In regard to Protestantism, William Alston might be, to a degree, an exception to the rule. Though committed to epistemological issues, notably epistemic justification, he does attempt to find his way through the anti-realist thicket, which accentuates the role of our conceptual, linguistic, and theoretical choices, to affirm that «large stretches of reality» do not depend on these choices.

Briefly stated, what I mean is the effect of not only Luther's radical critique of the interference of pagan philosophy into Christian theology, but his implicit acceptance of the nominalist doctrines that dominated the late Middle Ages in the West and greatly reduced the human potential to think and say the real *qua* real. The ensuing thin ontology, i.e., without the transcendentals that ground analogical, multidimensional thinking, became normative for philosophical practices in general and, from Heidegger to Gadamer and Ricoeur, phenomenological hermeneutics in particular. Eschewing realist metaphysics yet celebrating the revelatory character of (especially) poetic and biblical language, hermeneutical thinking becomes an ontology of understanding, based on attending to the meaning that comes to us as an event occurring from within language. Ricoeur's creative use of phenomenology, comprising a dialectical relationship between instances of subjective intentionality and objective structural conditions at work in all spheres of human activity, did not meliorate the situation when applied to hermeneutics. Resulting from the tensional dialectic of the two instances, a critical hermeneutics emerged in the attempt to overcome the «hermeneutical problem,» left by the divide that Dilthey established between understanding in the «moral sciences» and explanation in the natural sciences. The solution bears the stamp of Kant (albeit post-Hegelian, as Ricoeur himself describes it), implying a Kantian reserve in regard to metaphysics and the granting of an autonomous space in which to exercise critical judgement of ontological belonging. In any event, nominalism reigns, and this not because there is no postulating of an extra-linguistic reality, but because no objective equivalents in it can be found for pronouncements about the true, the good, the one, and the beautiful, i.e., the transcendentals.² It is the domain of the problematic and not that of finding oneself participant in a divine mystery.

It is thus that the wish to reposition hermeneutics will involve a greater emphasis on participation and analogy; it will also see meaning as belonging to the all-embracing dynamics of divine action, the intent of which is expressed in

Cf., *A Sensible Metaphysical Realism* (Milwaukee: Marquette Univ. Press, 2001). Though thematically different, Alston's *Perceiving God* reveals the same underlying conviction. It still remains to be seen how much analogy and connaturality might be established between human knowing and saying and that which is.

² I agree with Conor Cunningham that nominalism could eventually be called nihilism. His *Genealogy of Nihilism* is influential in what is so quickly outlined here. John Milbank's chapter on «Science, Power, Reality,» in *Theology and Social Theory* is as well. Luther's impact on modern Western philosophy is often cited, but the interest that his thinking about the Word held for Heidegger is worth underscoring, both for the nominalism and the nihilism that Heidegger's work represents. Some aspects of this and its relation to hermeneutics were treated in my «Relearning to Think Analogically: On the Decline of Language and the Alleged Silence of God» (in *Didaskalia*, 2009).

Scripture but ultimately constitutes life itself.³ Otherwise and succinctly put, the givenness of experience is ultimately gift and the meaning that is derived from it is not confrontational but involves a collaborative synergy between human and divine wills. The implication is that there is a substantial bond – a *vinculum substantiale*, thought of by Maurice Blondel as the Incarnate Word – that makes the synergy possible.⁴ For a picture of how the experience of interpretive reading is concerned with collaborative synergy in mind, John Milbank offers an interesting metaphor of a text as a «loose and complex knot of resistance» and that gives us a sense of how the human effort to understand is already part of an intrigue that draws ever forth the human subject into the understanding of more encompassing realities. Indeed, there is that looseness in the fabric of the Gospels that allows us movement, but also a tangle that needs sorting out, only to find ourselves more deeply entangled. As we (individually or in communion with all other members of the Body of Christ) read a text, try as we may,

We cannot undo the knot altogether... Always we feel the resistance, although this is from elsewhere, and we cannot precisely place it, for it belongs, ultimately, to a whole wider network of resistances and counter-resistances, which we ourselves, by our intervention, are further adjusting and altering.⁵

An initial step in formulating an analogy between repositioning hermeneutics in regard to the Gospels and Nellas's treatment of image of God can be found in his refusal to indulge in a «phenomenological study», i.e., description and assembling of the meanings that the Church Fathers have proffered about the image of God. In this context, I presume he has in mind something akin

³ Blondel's definition of truth, *adaequatio mentis et vitae*, is extremely suggestive of how a Christian philosophy ought to proceed: seeking to equate not just intellect but mind (a fuller expression of human intelligence) with life (ultimately understood in relation to the Incarnation). Everything in Blondel's thinking is about this. Coming at this from a different direction, Michel Henry sought to reverse the conception of phenomenology that is taken from the perception of worldly objects to propose a phenomenology of Life – absolute Life. Our first evidence of anything at all is the «appearing» of life. Also, «... the truth of Christianity is not in the order of thought: ... to capture the truth of Christianity in its most confounding affirmation is to look toward the Incarnation.» *L'Incarnation: Une Phénoménologie de la Chair*, p. 16.

⁴ Blondel takes up the expression from an idea that Leibniz advanced a one point in an exchange of letters with a Jesuit priest. For Blondel it comes to mean a substance that is at once composed and fully one. It is above all applicable to the Incarnation but extended to characterise the Eucharist, the Church, Tradition, and Action. Cf., my «Blondel, the Idea of the Suspended Middle, and the Church,» in *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, 9, January, 2009.

⁵ John MILBANK, *Theology and Social Theory Beyond Secular Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 267.

of Eliade's phenomenology of religious symbols and myths, the realm of the sacred the bounds of which may be traceable and categorised. In the case of the notion, «image of God», we find no clear-cut formulation as to what it means precisely. We find instead references to the human capacity to will freely, or to think, or to have self-determination, or personhood, or embodiment.

On the one hand, to simply describe and classify these characteristics as if they were phenomena «runs the risk of superficiality»: depth of personal commitment is sacrificed for the sake of clarity. And, on the other, the Fathers were hardly interested in phenomenological exercises of description and were indeed engaged in dynamics of divine revelation and sought to formulate their understanding of it. Taken as an approach that was largely shared, the «patristic orientation» seeks «/.../ that which can illuminate the term /i.e., «image of God»/ from within.»⁶ All the possible describable qualities attributable to human being – a «person who reveals nature and makes it concrete, since he is an image of the Son» – can be truly illumined as implying a Christological structure.⁷ Rationality, free will, or whatever other quality are rooted within this structure: the image that man bears is that of the archetypal image of God, the Christ. In regard precisely to this thematic, the patristic orientation consists implicitly in developing Paul's notion of Christ as image of God (cf., 1 Corinthians (15:49), Colossians (1:15-18), Ephesians (4:13) in conjunction with the idea of man as the image of God, as proposed in Genesis. Hence, «/.../ Christ constitutes the image of God and man the image of Christ; that is to say, that man is the image of the Image.»⁸ Rightly conceived as called to conform to Christ's hypostatic nature, man – conscious, free, personal – bears the image of the Archetype and is called to an effective Christification, i.e., deification. To become a god, the divine image that man always already possesses stands in need of being refashioned by God's work, to which man must be open and responsive (especially 2 Peter 1.2-4, but also John 10:34).

Thus situated, the Gospels are seen to be more than an object of study but indeed a living book that communicates Christ as the Incarnate Word, the fullness of God's revelation, the fulfilment of God's promise to restore and *realise* His fallen creation through His divine Son and those called to be His children as well. The Gospels most certainly do have a Christological structure and, addressing the human heart, speak of the origin and destiny of human being in terms of the image of the Image that man is. And in our brief discussion below about the content of the Gospel, we shall return to this idea, to wit, to the notion that

⁶ Panayiotis NELLAS, *The Deification in Christ: The Nature of the Human Person* (St. Validimir's Press: Crestwood, N.Y., 1987), p. 22-23.

⁷ NELLAS, p. 27.

⁸ NELLAS, p. 24.

the hypostatic union, effectuated by the Logos assuming flesh, constitutes the «bridge» capable of uniting, through grace (or «energies»), divine and human natures. The Gospels are fundamentally about the transformative realisation contained in the «common hypostasis» that binds human nature to the divine in the person of Christ.⁹ In still other words, the actions communicated in the Gospels are marked throughout by the hypostasis that *is* Christ Himself.

But in relation to the hermeneutical task as such before the Christological character of the Gospels, George Florovsky puts us squarely on the path already traced for us by Nellas:

The Evangelists and the Apostles were no chroniclers. It is not their mission to keep the full record of all that Jesus had done... . They describe His life and relate His works, so as to give us His image an historic, and yet a divine image. It is no portrait, but an ikon – but surely an historic ikon, an image of the Incarnate Lord.¹⁰

Importantly, the Gospels are a written witness to humankind, God's Word to human creatures, engaging them in their humanity, and more particularly in the divine image that they bear. The potential of human language to speak of God and speak of Him truly is conditioned by its capacity to cultivate that image which is bound analogically to its Archetype. Otherwise said, uncreated Life speaks to and in created life: *methexis*, analogical participation is the implied reality to be brought to light in hermeneutical readings of the Gospel. Here, once again, the divine image implanted in human being yearns for its realisation recognised in the Person of Christ, for whom, in whom, and through whom humankind is meant to live and have life abundantly. On this, Florovsky provides additional insights that also give some important direction for the repositioning of hermeneutics.

For man is created in the image and likeness of God – this 'analogical' link makes communication possible. And since God deigned to speak to man, the human word itself acquires new depth and strength and becomes transfigured. The divine Spirit breathes in the organism of human speech. Thus it becomes possible for man to utter words of God, to speak of God.¹¹

⁹ NELLAS, p. 32.

¹⁰ George FLOROVSKY, «Revelation and Interpretation», *Bible, Church, Tradition* (Buchervertriebsanstalt, Vaduz, Europa, 1987), p. 25.

¹¹ FLOROVSKY, p. 27.

This being the case, we can understand how it is that, together with the redemptive restoration of man's life in God's, the intent of the Good News is to grant to humankind a heightened power to communicate, to enter into communion, with God. And, to begin with, it is the work of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of truth, through whom the apostolic writings were formed in conjunction with worshipping practices of the Church and her commission to announce the Good News to the nations. As Florovsky adverts: «For Christ is not a text but a living Person and He abides in His body, the Church.»¹² Thus, the very emergence of the Gospels presupposes a lively and shared experience of faith and a love for Christ Jesus, come from God. A repositioned hermeneutics before the Gospels is, thus, not primarily about situating a stable sphere of meaning (explanation) in order to give thought free rein (understanding). Rather, it begins with an intuition of a whole, yet unique reality that nevertheless is alive, communicative and engages the reading (and believing) subject at the point of his very identity, as image of God.¹³

¹² George FLOROVSKY, «The Lost Scriptural Mind,» in *Bible, Church, Tradition*, p. 14.

¹³ Pavel Florensky provides a Trinitarian theory of knowledge that is promising in regard to the nature of truth as revealed in Scripture. It may be eventually supportive of an hermeneutics that is consonant with the Orthodox sense of wholeness – or perhaps an ontology of the One/Multiple (Difference).

The theory consists in holding concomitantly together Intuition and Discursion. The first corresponds to the immediate sense of given-ness that appears externally to the senses or externally to the intellect. There is immediate sense of self-identity, the sureness of which is nonetheless vain, and indeed lifeless. «Why is 'this' precisely 'this,' and not something else? What does the reason of this self-identity of the immediately given consist in?» (22) For its part, discursion respects the fluidity of life and the non-identical. Its argumentative mode of operation appeals to our sense of reasonableness. However, it risks running into a kind of bad infinity, incapable of proposing a unifying truth that is not simply based on another self-justifying argument.

A truth at once justified and grounded can be established on the basis of an Infinity conceived as an integral Unity, or (more importantly) a self-proving Subject that contains the non-identical, i.e., that flow of life, which challenges, «destroys», self-enclosure and yet persistently restores the grounding Identity. Here, Identity dies as fact and comes alive as act – therein, its quality as Absolute Subject, or from the perspective of Michel Henry, Ipseity. The One maintains its Identity but is self-affecting, self-differentiating. The substance of the self-proving Subject is relational and remains Trinitarian, for extended beyond the three the One-ness would cease to be a self-differentiating Subject and move into indefiniteness, or absolute non-identity. Intuition is united with discursion.

Now, finally, more in line with our immediate purposes, Florensky states, «The truth contemplates Itself through Itself. / ... / Truth is the contemplation of Oneself through Another in a Third: Father, Son, Spirit.» (37). It is within this divine economy, extended into history and developed in human discursion, that deified persons, i.e., «new hypostases», are, by grace, drawn into the life of the Three. «They are conditional hypostases, which can be but do not have to be in the Subject of the Truth.» (38) In other words, at best they are images of the Image and their way to deification is made present to them in the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Pavel FLORENSKY, «IV. Letter Three: Trinity», *The Pilar and Ground of the Truth* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1997).

In his formulation of the principles that ought to govern Orthodox hermeneutics, John Breck also places the emphasis the integrity of Scripture's revelation of God in Christ, insisting in the threefold implications of the expression, «Word of God»: (a) as the Person of the divine Logos; (b) the Scriptures as written witness of Him; and (c) as the Church's proclamation of His abiding among and in us as a call to faith. However, for our purposes, it is particularly Breck's centring on the depth of God's engagement with humankind that is most directly pertinent:

/.../ the Word of God in the form of Scripture or proclamation, like the incarnate Logos Himself, must be understood as 'theandric' or a reality at once divine and human. To the Orthodox mind, the Scriptures are God's Word to His human creatures, and not merely human words about God. Nevertheless, that Word is the product of a *synergy* of 'co-operation' between God and His human agents.¹⁴

Working within an eschatological perspective of creation's full realisation, the analogical bond is dynamic and ever operative in the ongoing effort to give to the life of the Church and humankind the Christ-like configuration already genetically present in their being, indeed their reason for being. The personal and yet ontological character of Scripture, in general, and of the Gospels, in particular, situates the hermeneutics beyond nominalism and firmly within the all-comprehending divine economy regulated by the divine Logos. It is thus, as Breck suggests, that Scripture, and most especially the Gospels, must be ultimately understood in theandric terms, implying that God's actions have a loving, salvific and transformative intent, to wit, to lead humankind to the hypostatic union with Christ, the divine Logos.

In speaking (of) Christ, the Gospels themselves constitute a critical instance for all the signs and arguments that human beings may advance. They tell us that human history is fundamentally about the operations of divine action, itself instanced by the Cross, and how all else is henceforth to be seen in its light. John Behr writes convincingly of the Passion and of the Cross as the starting points for the Evangelists' narrative reconstruction of God has done for us in Christ Jesus. The upshot is that the Gospels overturn all the usual categories, beginning with the fact that God took upon Himself human flesh as the Incarnate Word and the role of a servant. «The transcendent power of God is manifest in

¹⁴ John BRECK, «Orthodoxy and the Bible Today», in *The Legacy of St Vladimir* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press: Crestword, 1990), p. 144.

this world in flesh, in darkness and in death, as a servant. But this manifestation of divine power, in weakness, is simultaneously a transformation ... »¹⁵ A hermeneutics of the Gospels puts us, *in medias res*, within the tension that the Gospels themselves announce between that which has effectively occurred and that which is still to be consummated. Very much as the Archetype of the image of God draws in anticipation the divine image planted in man, drawing him forth into the future, the notions of eschatology and that of fulfilment operate as integrating categories for the interpretation of the texts, i.e. categories that respect the integrity of the Word as hypostatic and realising the covenantal promises now made to all of humankind.

Let us take special note of the ana-logic involved in both the Archetype and eschatological consummation in relation to the image in man and the particularised exemplifications of God's dealings with His people as revealed in the texts. The analogical participation can be noted in the fact each postulates common hypostases yet an ontological difference: identity and difference coincide and yet collaborate in effectuating transformation/realisation of quality in the diversity of actual or possible situations. Just as the Image who is Christ implies an exemplary (in the Platonic sense) ordering of the divine image in man, eschatological anticipation of the Kingdom illumines the sense of human history.

In relation to the Synoptic Gospels, the Orthodox solution to the varying approaches to eschatology is to see it in terms of encompassing reality of Christ. This may be called «hypostatic eschatology», whereby the diverse attributions of eschatological references in the Gospels as being inaugurated, imminent, futurist, anticipated, consistent, or realised may be seen as all truly supported in the texts and all truly fulfilled in Christ Himself. The imagery in the apocalyptic passages, notably, Mark's «little apocalypse» in chapter 13 and Matthew 24, are dramatically accomplished in Christ's Passion and death. It is likewise the case that the prophecies announced in the Hebrew Scriptures are fulfilled in Him. The accounts of the Passion and subsequent effects of His death on the surrounding human and natural world in Matthew 26 and 27 correspond and complete the prophecies of chapter 24. All things are taken into His Person.

The hypostatic quality of the definitive consummation in Christ thus underscores the archetypal dimension of His personality: Christ embraces and elevates all of humanity and lives the destiny of the world in His Passion. In other words, He lives the events of the future in His own life. Even in His Kingdom teachings, especially in the parables that are most in evidence in the Synoptic Gospels, persons from any time in history are confronted with *his or her* truth,

¹⁵ John BEHR, *The Mystery of God: Life in Death* (St. Vladimir's Press: Crestwood, 2006), p. 35.

whether they are comfortable with it or not. Remarkably the teachings in the parables leave the hearers free to choose the direction of their lives. But from the perspective of God's intent to bring humankind to Him through His divine Son, the employment of parables constitutes a means by which believing hearts are distinguished from those who do not believe (Mark 4:11-12). In this too, Jesus Christ fulfilled an Old Testament prophecy (Matthew 13:35; Psalm 78:2).

As distinctive in tone and theme as the Gospel of St. John is in relation the Synoptic Gospels, it is, nevertheless, also marked by hypostatic focus on the significance of the Incarnation and the living reality of Christ. The accent on relationships brought to fore in the context of several dialogues that take place in the Gospel focuses our attention on Christ as the living example of what He preaches. Intriguingly many of the verses that constitute the teachings of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount can be equated with verses in John in which we see Christ as actually exemplifying them. For example, whereas Jesus in Matthew (7:14) teaches us about the narrow gate that leads to life, in John 14:6 we read that Jesus *is* the way, the truth and the life. The strong sense of actual personal bond with the Father is underscored from the outset in the Prologue with the reference *prós tón Theón*, «And the Word was with /God/», or perhaps equally correct, «And the Word towards (to) /God/.»

The Incarnate Word is «toward» God by nature and lifts humankind towards the source of life from above. Those whom He encounters are given a new awareness of the divine reality in their midst that they could not or would not confess before. The processes of revelation are effectively hypostatic paradigms, the supreme example of which is Thomas's recognition that resurrected Christ is simultaneously Lord and God (John 20:28). Similarly to the parables in the Synoptic Gospels, the hypostatic paradigms constitute encounters from which theological truths are traced and brought to light. Negatively we see in the attitude of the «Jews» a pattern of rejection of the Messiah indeed come unto them, His own; we see in Judas's betrayal the paradigm of one so close to the God/Man but blind to His reality. The underlying issue is faith and willingness to follow: Nicodemus is attracted to Jesus, but is afraid to follow; Peter also betrays the Messiah but confesses his love and will follow wherever he is led; the Beloved Disciple will be kept as a witness of the things that the Lord has done and will do for all who come to Him in faith. In every such instance, a highly particularised encounter yields a universalised truth of how human beings, made in the image of God, may relate to the exact Image of God, through whom all live, move, and have their being.

To the degree that it operates within the comprehensive scope of Orthodox wisdom, hermeneutics as a philosophical and theological task would do well to situate textual practices with the framework of a realist metaphysics in which a hierarchy of differentiation may be traced by thinking analogically. Importantly, thinking analogically constitutes an impediment to imagining eternal truth as

a frozen, static truth. Rather, it encourages a sense of participation in the dynamics of the Word, the continuing and generative action of Revelation in the temporal and material. And, if Gospel truth be taken to heart, this will entail the acknowledgment of our radical belonging to the God whose Archetype constitutes, not only our salvation as human beings, but holds out the promise of shared affiliation and life without bounds.