

Social Engagement as Part of the Call to Deification in Orthodox Theologies

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*The spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has
anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has
sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and
recovery of sight for the blind; to release the
oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

It is this text (Luke 4:18–19) which, since the 1970s, has been the common starting point in contemporary liberation theology.¹ And it is especially important that we consider the text in its scriptural and historical context.

Though Luke presents Christ's words as one solid excerpt from the prophet Isaiah (61:1–2), in reality they consist of two excerpts: the phrase "to release the oppressed" has been taken from a different point in Isaiah, where it serves to define the fasting which pleases God. This authentic fasting does not consist in observing ritual, "bowing one's head like a reed, [...] lying on sackcloth and ashes"; the fasting that pleases God is "to loosen the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke" (58:5–6).

The effect of this Lukan combination is therefore greater insistence on the fact that Jesus inaugurated an epoch of liberation, an epoch like the Jewish jubilee year, which meant the

¹ See, e.g., Gustavo Gutierrez, *The God of Life*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 6–9. See also Athanasios N. Papathanasiou, "Liberation Perspectives in Patristic Thought: An Orthodox Approach," *Studies in Orthodox Theology* 2 (2011): 420–421.

cancellation of debts and the liberation of slaves (Lev. 25:8–13). Moschos Goutzioudis has strongly argued in favour of the social content of the extract, pointing out, in particular, that Luke has omitted Isaiah’s verse “to bind up the brokenhearted” (Isa. 61:1), most likely because he wanted to avoid any inward-looking or individualistic (and not social) understanding of the verse.² Goutzioudis, with his use of modern scholarship, is representative of Greek Orthodox biblical scholars who are trying to bring to the fore the special social and political dynamics of the gospel.³

Other approaches, however, refute this social orientation and define human beings’ theosis (deification), solely as personal union with God, after the individual passions have been overcome through ascesis, including fasting.

Gregory Palamas (1296–1359) tries to clarify what kind of fasting is approved by God. Gregory quotes the above excerpt from Isaiah (“to loosen the chains of injustice...”) and continues:

The voracious and the unjust will not be resurrected to meet Christ face to face and be judged, but will be condemned directly because in this present life they never really came face to face with Christ. Enormous possessions are in reality communal, since they derive from the common fund of wealth provided by nature, which God has created. How then is he who appropriates the common wealth not actually greedy, even if he is not like the one who steals other’s goods? Thus, the former – alas – will suffer a terrible penalty as a

² Moschos Goutzioudis, “E Hrese tou Iovilaiou Etous sto Lk 4:18–19, se Syndyasmo me to Heirografo tou Koumran 11Q13” [“The Use of the Jubilee Year in Luke 4:18–19, in Relation to the Qumran Manuscript 11Q13”], in *To kata Loukan Evaggelion: Themata eisagogika, filologika, ermeneftika kai theologika* [The Gospel according to Luke: Introductory, literary, interpretative and theological issues] (Volos, Greece 2003), 93–106 [in Greek].

³ E.g., Petros Vasiliades, *Haris, Koinonia, Diakonia* [Grace, Communion, Service] (Thessalonike: Pournaras, 1985) [in Greek]; Miltiades Konstantinou, *O Profetes tes Dikaiosynes: Ermeneftike analyse perikopon apo to vivlio tou Amos* [The Prophet of Justice: an interpretative analysis of excerpts from the book of Amos] (Thessalonike: Parateretes, 1999) [in Greek].

bad servant, and the latter will endure worse and more horrible punishments. Neither of these can escape the sentence if he does not accept the poor in his life. At the Last Judgment, the righteous will say: "That attitude expressed in the phrase 'this is mine and this is yours' has long been expelled from here, since we in our earthly life hated it. For this reason we inherited the Kingdom of Heaven." The Church Fathers call the phrase 'this is mine, or this is yours' cold, and wherever it prevailed the bond of love was absent and Christ was pushed far away.⁴

According to Palamas, wealth, even that which is acquired legally, constitutes a problem in itself. The problem in essence is obsession with possession (ownership). This view constitutes the backbone which traverses biblical and patristic theology, something which Palamas himself knows and mentions. That the phrase "mine and yours" is indeed "cold" is something which John Chrysostom highlighted ten centuries earlier.⁵

I view as very important the phrase of Palamas: "if he does not accept the poor in his life." In accordance with a long tradition which already began from the Old Testament and has been incorporated in Church life, the widows, the poor and the weak are the friends of God, entitled to any form of solidarity.⁶ This perspective may constitute, in my opinion, a meeting point of traditional theology with modern liberation theology. Remember the key concept "preferential option for the poor," coined by Gustavo Gutierrez in 1967 and highlighted by the Medellin conference of Catholic bishops in 1968.⁷ However, what remains vague among Orthodox theologians is whether solidarity calls only for personal charity or, more than that, for

⁴ Gregory Palamas, "On the Fifth Lenten Sunday, Sermon 13," *PG* 151, 161C–165B]. For what follows, see Papathanasiou, "Liberation Perspectives," 421–425.

⁵ John Chrysostom, "On the Acts, Sermon 7," *PG* 60, 66.

⁶ See Papathanasiou, "Liberation Perspectives," 422–423.

⁷ John O'Brien, *Theology and the Option for the Poor* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992).