

Monism, Dualism, Pluralism? From Orthodox Cosmology to Political Theology

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Orthodox Christian Political Theology: An Old or New Discipline?

Orthodox political theology is not a new phenomenon, although the very term “political theology” as a discipline is a recent invention. If we define political theology (and Orthodox political theology in particular), as a theological reflection upon the social and political reality, we realize that this discipline has a long history, which has been practiced since the advent of Christianity. In spite of its length, however, the history of theological articulations of socio-political phenomena has not been very glorious. Over the past 1700 years most theological approaches to social structures and political institutions have been “conservative” in nature, in the sense that the role of these discourses has been to rationalize and justify the dominant order of power. In practice that meant justification of a hierarchically organized society, defense of the “symphony” model, and autocracy as *the* Christian mode of government.¹

¹ This can be seen across the spectrum, from fourth century authors such as Eusebius or John Chrysostom onwards, as discussed by Pantelis Kalaitzidis in his *Orthodoxy and Political Theology* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2012), 27.

***Church and State, Theology and Politics:
An Unholy Alliance***

The unholy alliance between the ecclesial and political structures that characterizes most of the so-called Christian societies over the last 1700 years had a double impact; one on the way the society and the state think and use Christianity and the Church, and the other on the way the Church and her theology think their own position *vis-à-vis* social and political entities. The result was that the ecclesial (priestly) roles conformed to the feudal socio-political organization, obscuring that way the eschatological meaning of these offices.

Only recently, following important social and political changes that came as a result of modern secular processes, have we come to the situation in which Christian theologians in general, and Orthodox Christian theologians in particular, began to think seriously about democracy, pluralism, and secularization as social and political phenomena that deserve a careful theological analysis and articulation.

One must, however, be careful here. Modern and contemporary social and political changes that are in many of their aspects positive and more advanced compared to previous political systems should not be either automatically rejected or uncritically embraced and glorified. A closer examination of what the basic Christian response to the social and political challenges of the day should look like can prevent contemporary theologians from making the same kind of mistakes that many earlier Christian thinkers made. What I have in mind here is a remarkable faculty of obedience to the dominant order of power that many Christian thinkers (and, for that matter, intellectuals in general) have demonstrated in the course of history. We can even recognize a pretty consistent pattern according to which theologians first rationalize and justify the dominant socio-political system unless that system is openly hostile to Christianity. Once the system collapses or becomes obviously illegitimate and dysfunctional, the immediate reaction is to try to reject and condemn the “innovations” that are,

naturally, “demonic” by their origin.² The next step, once it becomes impossible to continue with the rejection of the new socio-political system, is normally to develop new conceptual tools that provide a rationale and justification for the new power structures.

The problem here, of course, is not only that many theological reflections have failed the test of time; the problem is that they have, in my view, betrayed an *authentically* Christian approach to the world. As a result of this inglorious history, I think that there is a need for a more articulate Orthodox political theology, which should not be envisioned either as a justification of the current socio-political order, or as a prescription for establishing an ideal society on earth. Orthodox political theology, as I see it, should be a critical discourse, with the primary aim to challenge the power structures and social processes, based on some of the basic elements of the Christian faith. Its legitimacy relies upon our responsibility for this world, both as Christians and citizens of concrete societies.

The Kingdom of “Caesar” and the Kingdom of God

There is an inherent tension between Christianity and Christian theology on the one side, and the socio-political reality and the “world,” on the other. This tension has to do with the very structure of the biblically revealed Christian faith, and the “practical philosophy” (a certain *way of life*) that Christianity affirms. The tension consists in the paradoxical status of “this world” in its relation to the Kingdom of God.

On the one hand already in the New Testament we find a plentitude of references that clearly distinguish and even contrast the Kingdom of God to “this world.” In the gospel of John for instance, we find the contrast between the coming

² Compare to Kalaitzidis’s comment that “For all these figures (Joseph de Maistre, Loius Boland, Donoso Cortés – *note by D. Dž.*), the Enlightenment, as well as modernity and the whole notion of human rights, represent an absolute evil and humanity’s fall, indeed the ‘original sin’ of modern democracy. It is from these intellectuals that Carl Schmidt borrows the identification of ‘royalism’ with ‘theism’ and Christianity, as well as his overall opposition to democracy and political liberalism.” Kalaitzidis, *Orthodoxy and Political Theology*, 21.