

Radical Orthodoxy, Eastern Christianity, and Liturgical Enactments of Economic Truth

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Abstract

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The author reviews the connections between Orthodox theology (especially as practiced by Alexander Schmemmann, John Meyendorff, and Kallistos Ware), the theology of Radical Orthodoxy (especially as practiced by John Milbank, Graham Ward, Catherine Pickstock, and William Cavanaugh), and the economics of D. Stephen Long and Daniel M. Bell Jr. This review has as its goal a demonstration of the claim that “it is the church, uniting earth and heaven, which is the true ‘politics.’” And “[t]he earthly city is not a true *res-publica* because there can be no justice and no common weal where God is not truly worshipped.” The implications of this claim for the liturgical and socioeconomic practices of the contemporary Church and world are examined.



I. Introduction

Radical Orthodoxy (henceforth RO) is an answer to an Eastern Orthodox (or, more generally, Eastern Christian) prayer.¹ Finally, Eastern Christianity has an expansive intellectual resource that can help it emerge from decades of re-

¹ For a very readable introduction to RO see James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

trenchment, and return to the kind of world-engaging discourse practiced by Soloviev, Florensky, Bulgakov,² and less vigorously by Alexander Schmemmann.³ By this I mean that RO's fluency with modern and post-modern thought, and its equal commitment to Christian orthodoxy, provide Eastern Christian theologians with the kind of wisdom⁴ that enables them to analyze contemporary philosophical and otherwise social currents without degenerating into redundant social theory.

Before proceeding, let me explain the curious title of this paper and how I plan to proceed. In the context of an ecumenical conference hosted by an Eastern Christian university, I was invited to speak on RO and economic questions "using my additional expertise as a liturgist." Actually, liturgy is one of the few areas in which I can claim expertise. Thus, other dimensions of this paper will not resound with the depth and nuancing that philosophical theology demands. Nonetheless, I am emboldened by the fact that to date no one has written a study that would introduce RO to Eastern Christians (even though I shall be doing so *sub specie economiae et liturgiae*). The paper, then, will occasionally betray an expository tone, for which I beg the indulgence of those more familiar with RO.

After summarizing how RO resonates with various aspects of Eastern Orthodox theology, I will proceed to a presentation of RO's grounding in worship, followed by a mapping of the economic analyses of D. Stephen Long, Daniel M. Bell Jr., and John Milbank, and to a lesser extent Graham Ward, Catherine Pickstock, and William T. Cavanaugh. In the final section I shall attempt a synthesis that will hopefully elucidate the claim that "it is the church, uniting earth and heaven, which is the

² For an analysis of Soloviev's and Bulgakov's theologies that stresses their engagement with the world see Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov – Orthodox Theology in a New Key* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

³ I say "less vigorously," only because Schmemmann, not being a philosophical theologian, did not devote as much detailed reflection to such questions.

⁴ Wisdom is indeed the appropriate term here, as RO views "sophia" as theology's "intellectual" goal. Laurence Paul Hemming, "Introduction: Radical Orthodoxy's Appeal to Catholic Scholarship," in *Radical Orthodoxy? – A Catholic Inquiry* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2000), 19.

true ‘politics.’” And “[t]he earthly city is not a true *respublica* because there can be no justice and no common weal where God is not truly worshipped.”⁵

II. *RO and Eastern Orthodoxy*

The Privileging of Worship as Hermeneutic Matrix

RO’s focus on true worship is probably the most appropriate place to begin pointing out its affinities with Eastern Orthodoxy.⁶ Because I devote an entire section below to RO’s approach to liturgy, let me treat this affinity very briefly by citing a memorable accolade by R.R. Reno who summarizes the centrality of liturgy to RO’s project thus: “If Radical Orthodoxy is any sign of the future, tomorrow’s academy will see countless theses on the subversive power not of transsexuality, but of the Eucharist – in all, a welcome development.”⁷ This is because, in the words of John Milbank: “Outside liturgy, outside the logic of the Mass, there can be no meaning.”⁸ I shall unpack the significance of this provocative statement later in the paper.

⁵ William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002), 15.

⁶ For an engaging discussion of liturgy’s privileged position in Eastern Orthodoxy, see Anthony Ugolnik, *The Illuminating Icon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 125–32. For a discussion of liturgy as the “ontological condition of theology” see Thomas Fisch, ed., *Liturgy and Tradition: Theological Reflections of Alexander Schmemmann* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1990), 18.

⁷ “The Radical Orthodoxy Project,” *First Things* 100 (February, 2000): 37.

⁸ Endorsement on the back cover of Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998).

Suspicion of Secularity and Secularism

Alexander Schmemmann once wrote that “secularism is, above all, a negation of worship.”⁹ RO shares with Eastern Orthodox theology not only a privileging of worship as hermeneutic matrix, but also a programmatic suspicion of secularity itself.¹⁰ The very title of RO’s “charter,” Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, testifies to this.¹¹ If, as David Tracy once noted, modern theologies “were principally determined not by the reality of God but by the *logos* of modernity” and this, to paraphrase Hans Frei, enabled modern theologians to “gain the whole world – the world of academic respectability and cultural plausibility – yet lose their souls,”¹² then RO is certainly allied with Eastern Orthodoxy in trying to regain theologians’ souls. And while Eastern theology has only marginal academic respectability and even less “cultural plausibility,” RO – precisely because of its familiarity with post-modernity’s own tools – has already achieved respectability and plausibility without losing its soul.

The Nature of Theology

In his introduction to *Radical Orthodoxy? – a Catholic Enquiry*, Laurence Paul Hemming bemoans the way in which theology “becomes styles of theology or theologies which have no responsibility toward God at all, but reduce God to the kind of commodity that technology routinely manipulates.” Quoting – of all people – Heidegger, he says: “Theology thereby becomes ‘diabology’ in that it is cut off from discussing God as God, because God is reduced now only to a commodity to be traded either in mere conceptualizations or in their encap-

⁹ Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1973), 118.

¹⁰ Regarding Eastern Orthodoxy’s approach see, for example, pages 7 and 117 of Schmemmann’s *For the Life of the World*.

¹¹ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006).

¹² Both of these citations are from Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 19.