

Preface
Hellenism in Motion
John Milbank

It is a pleasure to introduce this volume of probing essays concerning the work of one of the most important and insufficiently attended-to thinkers of our times, the Greek orthodox theologian and philosopher Christos Yannaras.

It might be more accurate to say that Yannaras is a Hellene, rather than a Greek. The position of Greece in modern Europe is curious: is its culture Eastern European or Mediterranean? Clearly, it is both and, as such, offers something of a bridge between East and West, Latin and Graeco-Slavic. Unlike Italy, however, it does not appear to offer a continuous historical link from antiquity to the present. There has been too much rupture, and often it has appeared to be a shadow of its former self. We now know that any notion that the modern Greeks are not of the same stock as the ancients to be an insidious myth and that the ruptures are largely to do with a violent history, not with ethnic and cultural legacy. Yet in this context Yannaras poses an awkward question: suppose that the oldest Greek legacy of the West has languished, not just in Greece but everywhere? Suppose that one aspect of the rupture is the departure of the West from the true Greek legacy, whereas the Roman legacy has been supported and sustained, just because it was already somewhat proto-modern? This explains much of his natural interest in Heidegger, even if his account of what has been crucially lost from the Hellenic legacy is in the end drastically different from that of the sage of the *Schwarzwald*.

It is this legacy that Yannaras celebrates, rather than that of modern Greece. For him, the emergence of Greece as a nation state involved capture by modern liberal notions of individualism, rights, social contract and absolute sovereignty. He regards this, despite my long-deceased Southwell neighbour Lord Byron's adventures, as an ironically imperial

seizure, ultimately displacing the older imperial legacies of the Ottomans and Byzantium, where the attempted universalism of empire was, however problematically (as Eric Voegelin so brilliantly discusses in *The Ecumenic Age*), linked to the other universalism of the quest for truth. In this way, the apparent dynamism of modernity has, for Yannaras, in reality imposed a certain formal stasis, and has lost a more substantive cosmopolitan dynamic, linked to an always unfinished quest for goodness, truth and beauty in trust that they are nonetheless realities.

In this context the main charge of Yannaras against the Latin West is that it is twice-over solely focussed on the individual. Once, in terms of its sole spiritual concern with the individual soul, in ultimate disparagement of both *polis* and *cosmos*. Twice, in terms of its assumption that it is the lonely individual who knows, in objective detachment from nature, whose 'facts' and inevitable or observed laws it disinterestedly records. All this is based upon an impoverished metaphysics unable to perceive any dynamic, energetic third between essence and individual, and therefore doomed to sterile debates about the objective reality or mere human constructedness of such essences, in either case restricted by an ultimate focus upon lone, individual substance.

Many of the essays in this volume raise doubts about the extremity of this contrast, including the earliest by date, written by Rowan Williams, who rightly asks whether Aquinas' concern with existential being did not modify such essentialism, similar to how notions of 'energy' did within the Christian East? One could add that an entire set of questions of *translatio studii* between East and West now look far more complex in the wake of the work of Williams on Augustine and of Christoph Erisman in his *L'Homme Commun* on the continuities of metaphysical realism from the Cappadocians through Maximus in the East to Boethius and Eriugena and beyond in the West. This legacy is fully alive in the West, far from any 'individualism' prevailing. The doctrines of original sin, Christology, and Trinity all helped to sustain an absolute 'reciprocity' between universal and particular, and are also derived philosophically from Porphyry: Universal Man falls from grace in Adam alone; Christ in person is 'all' of human and divine natures in one; the Nature of God is fully and only found in the three hypostases/persons of his Trinitarian existence. Moreover, the relationality of personhood, deriving from the Trinitarian context initially, was further developed rather than abandoned by both Augustine and Aquinas, as Williams and others have argued.

However, I thoroughly agree with Brandon Gallaher in this volume that one cannot so easily dismiss the demonisation of the West in the case of Yannaras as one can in the case of some Eastern Orthodox

genealogical mythologies. For one thing, he is fully alert to degeneracies within his own Orthodox tradition and fully prepared creatively to learn from modern Western thought in order to correct them. For another thing, and this one much more crucial, his most basic case is not that the West has suppressed apophaticism, personhood and relationality, but that it has forgotten the unity and dynamism of all truth-seeking and that it is a collective and natural endeavour. In this respect, he accuses his own tradition of having forgotten the true import of *apophasis* as well.

Perhaps his most crucial claim is that the apophatic legacy derives from classical Greece and was only consummated by the new, Christian context. It is by the same token that he rightly makes no real separation between theology and philosophy. This means that, for him, the ancient Greeks, like all other ancient societies (as none other than HRH Prince Charles has stressed), thought of their culture as seeking to reflect a cosmic order and thereby 'to be' in the truth. Yet in the Greek version of the 'axial' civilisational shift, this reflection was critically questioned and dynamised all the more as the cosmos itself was seen to reflect a transcendent, eternally truthful reality which was regarded by Socrates and Plato as 'good'. In this way, for Yannaras, the Western, critical, and 'enlightened' spirit was begun. But what the West and ultimately nearly all of us have forgotten was the link of critique to religion and a realist metaphysic of essence and participation, enshrined so acutely in Plato's 'Meno paradox', where we can only seek the truth if in some way we already share in it. Also forgotten is the fact that the Greek novelty remained rooted in a much more perennial human attitude that assumed a normative social 'representation' of reality, as Voegelin argued.

Viewed in this way, one can argue for the ultimate Western forgetting of the true Hellenic spirit, which also turns out to be much more 'ecumenically' related to other, far Eastern post-axial civilisations, as well as to purportedly 'primitive' human cultures. Perhaps this would serve both to confirm and adjust Heidegger's intuition of a forgetting – of both specifically Western authenticity and yet of the greater modesty of this intuition when compared to liberal and technocratic self-vaunting.

Of course, crucial stages of this forgetting now have to be dated much later than was once thought. The subordination of God to a flattened and abstract 'being' and ultimate, idolatrous reduction of him to the status of supreme single being occurred but gradually, from roughly 1300 onwards. It eventually brought in its wake the nominalist splitting of every reality between an 'empty' generalisation on the one hand and de-essentialised atomic individuals – who might potentially become anything and everything – on the other.

Nonetheless, the assumption that matters in the West were completely all right before that date, or that Aquinas unquestionably distilled the entire essence of Patristic wisdom, has to be called into question. Yannaras' understanding of the Hellenic spirit is that not only are theology and philosophy ultimately united, but so too are logic, physics, metaphysics and politics – a point admirably elucidated by Sotiris Mitralaxis in this volume. However much they may also have been distinguished, especially by Aristotle, they were still only distinguished in order to be ultimately re-united – in a synthesis which the German Romantics and Idealists tried to reconstitute.

In Yannaras' terms, this means that all proper human thinking is dialectical, part of a conversation for which the provisional (and not, as for Habermas, ultimate) test of truth is its acceptability by the community, and not just in theory, but as the basis for a shared existence. In this way, truth is socially performed, but in faithfulness to nature and to what lies behind the natural. Such an exercise is cataphatic, but *cataphasis* involves, as for Dionysius the Areopagite, the articulation of enigmatic symbols that are subject to qualification and ultimate negation insofar as they necessarily involve divisions which cannot apply to the ultimate divine ground of reality. To articulate a logic is to seek to echo and repeat the structures of the cosmos and to propose an erotic and political practice which will test and revise this logic. Through this logic we can approach and recreate in ourselves (as Eriugena remarkably says) human, natural and angelic others without exhausting their reality.

Obviously the paradigm for this understanding of Hellenism is Plato, and not, as for Heidegger, the presocratics. Once more, one can argue that it was for long sustained in both East *and* West, thanks to the correction by Neoplatonism of any disintegrative, purely peripatetic tendencies and the overwhelming endorsement and elaboration of this project by the Church Fathers.

Yet one might call attention to the entire question of a mediating motion, which is clearly central for Yannaras. Energetic motion is linkage and all linkage is dynamic. It is the entire question of the 'third' or of the 'between' (as William Desmond calls it) that mysteriously links essence and individual. The Porphyrian legacy, much reinforced by Christian doctrine, deemed these two realities to be entirely coincident, without elaborating exactly how. It is this question which Russian sophiology tried to resume and which the Cappadocian-derived discourse of *dynamis* and *energeia* had already broached.

However, the Cappadocian efforts, and that of Maximus later, rested on Neoplatonic revisions of categorial doctrine, stemming ultimately from Plotinus. In Aristotle himself, as recent research has shown, the question of motion, of *kinesis*, is very difficult. As long as something is in motion it is apparently and contradictorily at once in potency and act – otherwise motion would be deconstructable into a series of stoppages. For this very reason Aristotle thinks all motion must be a teleological ‘tending’ to something, or else it would just be at an end. Similarly, he also sees in the *Physics* that motion is infinitely divisible. Although this is only a potential infinite, the potential infinite is ontologically actual (not just a mental projection), as long as motion is in being.

These latent conclusions in part permit Neoplatonism to radicalise *kinesis*. If, for Aristotle, both potency and act are fully real and movement is fully real as the transition between the two, then how can there be any clear division between metaphysics, the science of Being and God, and physics, the science of moving things? Much later, Eriugena elaborates a ‘physics’, or ‘division of nature’ (*natura* translates as *physis*), which includes even God. If motion and rest are equally natural, then the higher nature of intelligence must involve both a greater contemplative rest and a higher, more unfinished, spiralling motion. Beyond Aristotle, Plotinus sees understanding as *kinesis* as well as *energeia*: as a literally moving, transitional as well as completed, action. If, for him, the One is now infinite, that is because it is the infinite consummation of motion beyond motion, since it is the aporetic hesitation of motion between act and potential that opens up the irreducibility of the infinite and not a contradictorily infinite projection of inherently limited act, as it might seem to be for Aquinas.

For this reason Plotinus also relativises Aristotle’s distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis* (and by implication between art and ethics). In every ‘making’ the mind itself fully goes out of itself and transits along with the external process of construction. Equivalently, in every ‘action’ some sort of expressive becoming must be also involved.

All this assumes that if motion is ontologically fundamental, then the priority of action over potential is questioned, though by no means reversed. By the same token, if transiting is ultimate, the process of differentiation involved suggests a certain mysterious reality of non-being, of the ‘this is not that’, on pain of denying alterity, as Plato had argued in the *Sophist*. It is for this reason that Plotinus places the transcendent One equally beyond rest and motion, act and potential, being and non-being. He fails to see, like some later writers as well as Aquinas, that thereby it could be said to be the infinite ‘to be’, which cannot have the same restrictions as a finite action. All the same, one can argue in

a Plotinian (and Eckhartian) vein beyond Aquinas that this *esse* must be also and equally infinite potential, infinite spiralling motion and an infinite abyss (as it is for Buddhism, though too one-sidedly). It is indeed a transcendent One that is all these things and also an infinite plurality, even if the preference for the ultimate terminology of ‘one’ occludes the dimension of eminent actuality.

Such an intensified *apophasis*, inherently linked to an ontological heightening of *kinesis*, was sustained and elaborated by the Greek Fathers and even to a degree by Augustine – though much less so. Eventually their perspectives were incorporated by Eriugena and arguably with much later influence, now untraceable (in the early thirteenth century the burning of his books in all libraries was ordered). He also incorporated different and yet somewhat equivalent appropriations of Neoplatonism by Boethius, at least with regard to an ontologically-focussed version of Porphyrian dialectics and a ‘reciprocal realism’, whose influence remained official and sustained.

Most crucial here is the point that a greater apophaticism, of Plotinian derivation, more admitting of motion and non-being into ultimate reality, can much more naturally allow the thinking of the Trinity. Here one can at last see that Ralph Cudworth (and his Anglican successors) grasped just this point and was not trying to ‘liberalise’ Trinitarian thought, in his *True Intellectual System of the Universe*, as Douglas Hedley and others have well understood. Thus in a mysterious, eminent sense, there can be generation and further procession in God, even an eminent formative making and a ‘dance-like’ forming-motion beyond form towards, and in keeping with, the motion of the other. In this way indeed, above and beyond the cosmos, polity is shaped and sustained with the Godhead.

Likewise, as Piero Coda argues in his *Dalla Trinità*, the persons can only be differentiated if this motion in God twice crosses the abyss of non-being, fearful transitions that are the eternal ground of the finite suffering and seeming risk undergone on the Cross, besides the glorious novelty of Pentecost.

In this way then, the Neoplatonic heightening of *kinesis* permits for the Trinity the thinking of dynamic mediation between essence and person. Essence is also the transitional *dynamis* that is manifested and received, as Gregory of Nyssa understood it. Equally it is the ‘stylistically’ yet substantially fusing energy involved in the *enhyphostasis* of the human nature in Christ. Likewise, it is the negatively moving ‘transmission’ of the sin of Adam which is the manifestation of his essence in identity with his singleness as the excess of contagion – something better brought out by Augustine.

This heightening also better permits the thought that the self-contained divine essence is paradoxically at one with its outgoing 'energies', as for Maximus the Confessor. God is in himself ecstatic. Or, as Eriugena has it, in radicalising the Greeks, God as infinite is not self-circumscribed, even as self-knowable, and *therefore* reaches beyond even the 'no beyond' into a circumscription where he creates, defines and knows himself in rendering something other to himself. This 'created God' is initially the core of the world beyond the world which the Bible names 'wisdom' and Eriugena the 'created and creating' 'Primordial Causes' which are the equivalent of Maximian *logoi* and Augustinian *rationes seminales*. The core of ontological reality is not *justousia*, or essence, but also a moving, shaping and thinking process, which gradually flows down from the primordial causes through the universal *genera* and *species* that pre-include particulars (in a more passing and essential mode) to individuals that fully and reciprocally include their universals, though more in the mode of fully-realised substantive rest. Their basis is not, for Eriugena, a fixed material stability; rather, every instantiated *atoma* is a unique 'bundle' of the (ultimately divine) shaping and in-flowing thoughts, a singular combination of the 'alphabet' of inherently universal essential qualities.

What we can glimpse in all of this is the inherent link between a more radically apophatic doctrine of the divine simplicity on the one hand, and a more fluid ontology on the other. By comparison, even the restoration of metaphysical realism undertaken by Aquinas risked (for all the factors in his thought that massively qualify this) first, marginally reducing divine simplicity by entertaining some distinction between an absolute and ordained power (as the late John Hughes so brilliantly argued in pitting Bulgakov against Thomas) and concomitantly too much residual sense of a divine literal 'choosing' of one action rather than another. Secondly and simultaneously, this restoration risked losing some integral dynamism by not entirely preserving the unity of metaphysics, physics and logic – even though at several points he is close to reinstating it and even though one must admit that specific attention to logic and grammar yields ultimate ontological gains.

Aquinas' accounts of analogy and *convenientia* indeed involve a great fluidity, both vertical and horizontal. Yet he fails to be (and likely could not have been) aware of how the essentially Neoplatonic legacy of *paronomasia* and attributive analogy tends to displace the primacy of substance towards the co-primacy of *kinesis*, for two linked reasons. First, as Plotinus concluded, substance itself cannot be univocally predicated even within cosmic reality because one then faces an *aporia*:

either superior things (like intelligences and rational embodied beings) are included with one genus of substance with inferior things and hierarchy is thereby subordinated to a 'transcendental' universal class, or else there is no continuity of being and thinghood at all, which is clearly false. For this reason, substance itself and even within immanence is subordinated, beyond Aristotle, to *pros hen* predication, never mind in the case of being.

Secondly, this implies that such predication repeats and captures the reality of a moving ontological linkage between levels of substance, whereby higher generates lower, lower is at once same and different to higher, while it at once seeks to go out from and return to the higher reality. Such motion, like all motion, is inherently aporetic, indeed 'contradictory', as Aquinas does not allow, but Eckhart and Cusanus later will.

To contextualise these observations, in support of Yannaras' sense of a Latin deviation, one can point to the significance of Abelard's earlier parricide of his teacher, William of Champeaux, as newly discussed by Alain de Libera, John Marenbon and Christophe Erismann. As the latter suggests, Champeaux fully sustained the 'reciprocal realism' of the Greek and some Latin fathers, in his case as an isolated thesis, divorced from a wider metaphysical vision. In consequence, Abelard could readily treat it as a mainly logical thesis which was seemingly logical nonsense. The paradoxes and strange coincidences argued for by realism (and by Christian doctrine insofar as it is orthodox) all truly depend on the attempt to think and speak the strangeness of the *real world* and especially its curious 'connectedness'. It is then no accident that scholastic realism briefly returned to favour with the discovery of Aristotle's more natural and metaphysical writings. Yet without a strong Neoplatonic gloss (which is indeed to some degree present in Aquinas), this did not prove enough to head off the advocates of nominalism and 'disconnection', nor the corralling of logic and cosmology against the metaphysical.

There were still stronger counter-currents: the School of Chartres and the Albertine tradition; eventually Nicholas of Cusa, the heir of both; and other Renaissance thinkers like Pico and Ficino. There has been a tendency within Eastern Orthodoxy sometimes to view these figures, seemingly more sympathetic for Eastern Christian tradition, as 'too extreme' or even as heterodox. I would contend that often this extremity is precisely the result of a clearer sense, owing to direct experience, of where Western errors are likely to lead and the need to head them off by a still stronger thinking-through of the 'Hellenic' tradition. In the end then, Italy and the Rhine (and beyond!) do not represent solely a Roman continuation.

But what is the source of these errors? Perhaps one has to say that finally it is theological. The paradigm for the Western choosing individual, as for the Western sovereign pope and state, is the conception of God as a long, single, choosing, merely ontic being. He is not of course even remotely already there in Augustine, and yet Augustine's allowance of a seemingly non-synergic 'predestination', when taken alongside the Western (and indeed majority Eastern) allowance of a region of hell that can (somehow) prevail eternally alongside God, ultimately and fatally encourage the ideas of God and creation as ontically separate realms and of divine and human action as in competition with each other, – whether this ultimately ensues in semi-Pelagianism or in Lutheranism and Calvinism.

In many ways it would seem that the perverse desire to defend this false 'transcendence' was the factor that most powerfully lent to the disconnection of cosmos from God, and individual human thought from human involvement with nature and with political society.

As Yannaras says, however, the project of the Church – the ecclesial council of the cosmic polity on earth, the assembly of the wise under the guidance of the *Logos*, and the engraced restorers of a shattered nature – is precisely the reverse, Hellenic one of combining an integrated vision with a project of reintegration. With him, we must keep faith that a shattered Church still contains within these fragments the primordial seeds of restoration and renewal. With him, and inspired by his lead and example, we must take up once more this truly philosophical and political cosmic project.