Chapter Three
The Freedom of Relationship as the Ontological Foundation in Christos Yannaras' Political Theology

Angelos Gounopoulos

The Ecclesia of Christ as Polis

Christos Yannaras clarifies that 'politics is not a noun but an adjective; it is the political life, the life of the polis'.[1] The Greek Christian philosopher explains:

> *Polis* for the ancient Greeks was not a settlement that had grown to a quantifiable size. It was a *common struggle*, the struggle aimed at attaining life *according to truth*. What it wanted was that social coexistence should have truth as its goal, that it should not simply have a utilitarian purpose . . . . Moreover, they located truth in the common *logos*/mode (the given rationality) . . . of the relations that make the universe a *cosmos*, an ornament of harmony, order, and beauty. Such a mode of existence *according to truth* was what the city, or *polis*, sought to imitate and realise.[2]

According to Yannaras, the same choice is made in Christianity concerning the way believers (the disciples of Jesus Christ) meet and coexist in order to manifest their own truth. This is called the *ecclesia* (church). Furthermore, Christianity is understood as an ecclesial/Eucharistic event. Ecclesia is an ecclesial event; it is not a building, a denomination or an institution. As Yannaras argues:

1. Christos Yannaras, *Τὸ Προνόμιο τῆς Ἀπελπισίας [The Privilege of Despair]* (Athens: Grigoris, 1983), 29.
2. Christos Yannaras, *Against Religion: The Alienation of the Ecclesial Event*, trans. Norman Russell (Brookline MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2013), 21-2.

> The Greek word ἐκκλησία (*ecclesia* in its Latinised form) was chosen to express not a new religion but a social event – a *mode* of relations of communion . . . a mode of human existence and coexistence.[1]

Theology itself, as an expression of the ecclesia, is also an expression of the common life of the polis in which Christians take part and also participate creatively in the way that common life is constituted. Theology can therefore be characterised as a political theology, among other things. In addition, theology is considered 'political' as an expression of the ecclesial event in the common life of the polis, and does not only participate in the manifestation of the polis, but also has political consequences for it.

This connection of the polis/state and the ecclesia/church or the complex of politics and theology or Eucharistic event has been expressed in three main currents in modern theological thought. The first current supports the idea that a political theology can be directly produced from the Gospel of Christ and the witnessing of His Church in the world.[2] According to this logic the Church understands itself and is constituted as an 'alternative polis' with the mission to reveal to the world through its example the way the world exists. In this way it shows the existence of two distinct empirical ways of life, which also constitute distinct political experiences.[3] This separation of the two experiences of the Church and the state does not mean that the Christian underestimates the worldly. The people of God manifest their 'good news' into the world as an 'alternative polis' (church); they do not deny the world or withdraw from it.[4] The politics of the Christian are the political life of the Church-polis, which is distinct from the political life of the state-polis.

1. Ibid., 21.
2. A characteristic sample of this view is found in John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).
3. J. Alexander Sider, *To See History Doxologically, History and Holiness in John Howard Yoder's Ecclesiology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 20-1, as cited in Fr Evangelos Gkanas, 'Η Πολιτικὴ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ καὶ ἡ Προσδοκία τῶν Ἐθνῶν: Θέτοντας τὸν Τζὸν Χάουαρντ Γιόντερ καὶ τὸν Ὄλιβερ Ὸ Ντόναβαν σὲ Διάλογο' ['The Politics of Jesus and the Expectation of Nations: Bringing John Howard Yoder and Oliver O'Donovan in Dialogue'] in *Θρησκεία καὶ Πολιτική [Religion and Politics]*, ed. Stavros Zouboulakis (Athens: Artos Zois, 2016), 355-6.
4. John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 6, as cited in Gkanas, 'Η Πολιτικὴ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ καὶ ἡ Προσδοκία τῶν Ἐθνῶν' ['The Politics of Jesus and the Expectation of Nations'], 359.

The second current is a correlation between the two fields, the spiritual and the secular or the ecclesiastical and the political. According to this position, the Church must not show arrogance by trying to exist as a distinct and superior witnessing about the world but it needs to relate with it, to ideologise it through its spirituality, to provide it with an ethical dimension through the incarnated and democratised *Logos* of God.[1]

The third current supports that the models of distinct or of separate fields are obsolete because the Christian lives and becomes a Christian inside the world and with it. A characteristic example thereof is Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian Dominican priest and professor of theology, considered as one of the main founders of Theology of Liberation, who rejected any problem of dualism and added that the 'natural and the supernatural orders are therefore intimately unified.'[2]

Independently of whether someone supports the distinction or the separation of the ecclesial and the political event, their direct correlation or even their total identification, one cannot deny the political dimension of theology and the Church. Because of this fact, the German Reformer theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, argues:

> Political theology was not understood as a theology of the political, but rather it was a designation for every Christian theology and a hermeneutical or fundamental-theological category. There is consciously political theology, there is politically un-conscious theology, but there is no such thing as an un-political theology, at least not on this earth and presumably not even in the heavenly *politeuma*.[3]

1. A characteristic case of this position, according to the professor of theology William T. Cavanaugh, is the French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain. Cf. William T. Cavanaugh, 'Church' in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott et al. (Malden: Blackwell, 2007), 400-1, as cited in Gkanas, Ἡ Πολιτικὴ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ καὶ ἡ Προσδοκία τῶν Ἐθνῶν' ['The Politics of Jesus and the Expectation of Nations'], 357.
2. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation. History, Politics, and Salvation*, ed. and trans. Sister Caridad Inda et al. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 70. Regarding the problem of history and ontology and the interpretation by the Latin American theology of liberation, see also Angelos Gounopoulos, 'The Common Path of Ontology and History: Orthodoxy and Theology of Liberation in Dialogue' in *Mustard Seeds in the Public Square: Between and Beyond Theology, Philosophy, and Society*, ed. Sotiris Mitralexis (Wilmington, Delaware: Vernon Press, 2017), 165-89.
3. Jürgen Moltmann, 'Political Theology in Ecumenical Contexts' in *Political Theology: Contemporary Challenges and Future Directions*, ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 2.

According to Moltmann, theologies can be categorised as 'church', 'state' or 'prophetic'. The first distinguishes the ecclesial from the political event without totally separating them; the second transforms Christianity into a state or political ideology and power practice, while 'Political Theology as prophetic theology is liberation theology, and liberation theology, is Political Theology'.[1] Moltmann argues that after Auschwitz the privatisation of the faith is no longer possible for Christian life and 'theology belongs in the realm of the public discussion of political freedom, social justice, and the future of the earth'.[2]

Moreover, the German Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz argues about the distinction between the 'old' or 'classical' political theology and the 'new' one. The 'old' or 'classical' political theology understands the 'political' in terms of national and legal policy, as an ideology of statism (from Roman political metaphysics until Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Carl Schmitt and the 'Catholic State').[3] On the contrary, the 'new' political theology uses the term 'political' in 'a strictly theological intention',[4] which knows how to 'distinguish between the secularisation of the state and the dialectic of secularisation in society'[5] by strengthening Reason (*logos*) 'alive in the Public Sphere'.[6]

As a result, it makes sense to claim that political theology is distinguished from political philosophy, ideology or social theory, because it is a theology and Christology of a special mode of life, inspired by the life of Jesus Christ, faith in God and the freedom of love. As a conclusion, every Christian has a political life, even though they don't exhaust their mode of existence in the political dimension, and because of that every theology is a political theology. Following this logic, people became Christians because, although they lived a political life and had a great interest in it, they put at the centre of their existence the Eucharistic and ecclesial event. In this way they combined the polis with the Ecclesia.

1. Ibid., 11.
2. Jürgen Moltmann, 'European Political Theology' in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology*, ed. Craig Hovey et al. (New York NY: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3.
3. Johann Baptist Metz, 'Two-Fold Political Theology' in Fiorenza, *Political Theology*, 13.
4. Ibid., 14-15.
5. Ibid., 16.
6. Ibid.

Christos Yannaras' Criticism of Western Political Theology

Christos Yannaras sets the framework for his critique of Western political theology in a work from 1983. He argues:

> The term 'political theology' in the West today has taken a very special content: it means a group or school of theologians that try to interpret the message of the gospels for the salvation of man with the instruments of modern political theories, mostly from the Marxist and neo-Marxist left. The main endeavours of this 'political theology' vary from a purely theoretical-scientific attempt of political interpretation of the biblical texts to an immediate and practical involvement of theologians and priests in radical movements.[1]

Yannaras takes a critical stance towards political theology: in his view, conservative, liberal and revolutionary political theology belong to the same 'coin' of Western theology, not because they have the same political practices, ideologies and modes of life, but because they are based on the same faulty ground of Western logic. This ground is traced by Yannaras through two basic problems: the problem of the polarisation between the transcendental and the worldly, and the problem of political commitment as a mechanism of individualistic over-compensation.

The Problem of the Polarisation between the Transcendental and the Worldly

According to Yannaras, political theology in the context of the Western world becomes one pole in the conflict between an intellectualist, academic and scholastic theology on one side, and a practical, hyper-politicised and committed, or 'militant' theology on the other. Western political theology belongs to the second pole,[2] where the emphasis on

1. Christos Yannaras, *Κεφάλαια Πολιτικῆς Θεολογίας [Chapters of Political Theology]* (Athens: Grigoris, 1983), 9. Yannaras, in this text of 1983, argues that this interpretation of the gospels' message through the modern theories was mostly made with instruments from the Marxist and neomarxist left. It is important to understand, that even though nowadays almost no one can use Marxism as the hermeneutical horizon of reality, Yannaras' criticism of political theologies has not lost its value.
2. Clodovis Boff and Leonardo Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (London: Burns & Oates, 1987), 19. The term 'Militant' is used by Leonardo and Clodovis

the practice and social radicalism of revolutionary political theologies is a natural response to and a negation of the centuries-old dominance of intellectual Scholasticism and the absolute truth that stems from this mode of metaphysical thinking.

The context of academic and scholastic theology identified the truth with the *Idea* of it and God with the *Noesis*. As American philosopher Charles Taylor added, 'the space of disclosure is considered to be *inside*, in the "mind"'.[1] According to Yannaras, this pole found in Aquinas and Descartes the climax of its metaphysics, in which faith is understood as an achievement of internal thinking and individual logic.

In this context, idea produces idea, thought produces thought, theory produces theory, independently of the total experience of the whole person and the experience of its relationship with others and the incarnated world, with which it constitutes a community or society. The development of this metaphysical understanding of the relationship between the transcendental and the worldly transforms theology into a philosophical system and faith becomes ideology. This intellectual logic thus leads to a problematic understanding of incarnation and history. As the French Catholic theologian Jean Daniélou points out, there is a distinction between Thomism and Patristic theology. In his own words, 'the concept of history is not part of Thomism. On the contrary it is central to the big patristic systems'.[2]

According to Yannaras, political theology, transformed through materialism and historicism into a revolutionary political movement, came into conflict with Western metaphysical Christianity, which was politically harmless. As a result, transcendental theologies deal with a 'God-Idea' that does not relate with the incarnated experience and its history, while the secularised theologies of praxis focus on a history rid of the eschatological experience. In many cases, political theology becomes so obsessed with changing social structures and political institutions that it seems like a 'theology without God'.[3]

However, the following must be made clear: Yannaras does not criticise theologies of political praxis or theologies of history. Quite the contrary, since incarnation and historical experience form a basic

Boff to describe the commitment to the poor by the Christians of the Latin American movement of 'Theology of Liberation'.

1. Charles Taylor, 'The Person' in *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History*, ed. Michael Carrithers et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 277.
2. Rosino Gibellini, *Ἡ Θεολογία τοῦ Εἰκοστοῦ Αἰώνα [Twentieth Century Theology]*, trans. Panagiotis Yfantis (Athens: Artos Zois, 2009), 240.
3. Apostolos Nikolaidis, *Κοινωνικοπολιτικὴ Ἐπανάσταση καὶ Πολιτικὴ Θεολογία [Socio-Political Revolution and Political Theology]* (Katerini: Tetrios, 1987), 107.

pillar of his ontology and theology. The problem for him is that in many cases political theologies develop an historic devotion in which they underestimate the Resurrection and the Eucharistic dimension in their emphasis on social and political activism. In these cases, Yannaras wonders: 'why is theology needed in this context? Why is it not enough just to be politically or to be a revolutionary?'[1]

The Problem of Political Commitment as a Mechanism of Individualistic Over-Compensation

According to Yannaras, the main problem of the person who is socially and politically committed (or militant), while basing his activity on biblical tradition, is demonstrated in the fact that for this person Christianity is conceived and experienced as a religious and not as an ecclesial event. The religious event is individualistic, connected with commitment of any kind, including political and social commitment. On the other hand, the ecclesial/Eucharistic event as the Christian event per se, refers to the human person who related with others, with nature and God, in the freedom of Love.

But why does an individualistic religious logic lead necessarily to any kind of commitment, while an ecclesial logic leads to the freedom of relationship? Yannaras argues:

> Religion is another kind of event: it has a codified 'faith' which it demands from others, it has 'dogmas,' which the individual has to accept as his own beliefs. . . . The subordination of the individual to the 'right' beliefs and the upholding of norms of 'divine validity' exclude communal participation and make up another kind of event: a commitment that secures ego, through 'eternal' security.[2]

In this normative religious framework the Western Church is understood as an 'acropolis under siege' from the powers of evil and sin. The dogma of ideas and practices that offer salvation has been definitely given; its truth has been certified by the hierarchy of the Church or through the mystical experience of the inner self and the believer is now called upon to defend it individually. Christianity becomes a religion, and religiousness as an

1. Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, trans. Elisabeth Briele (Crestwood, NY: St.Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 200; Yannaras, *Κεφάλαια Πολιτικῆς Θεολογίας [Chapters of Political Theology]*, 9-10.
2. Christos Yannaras, *Ἡ Εὐρώπη Γεννήθηκε ἀπὸ τὸ Σχίσμα* [*The Great Schism Engendered Europe*] (Athens: Ikaros, 2015), 114.

individual choice and a mechanism of belonging serves the psychological defence that seeks existential security and certainty.[1] Every other person who questions their beliefs and axioms is thus seen as a threat and an enemy.

According to Athanasios Papathanasiou, a theologian and editor of *Synaxi*, a major theological journal in Greece, the belief that orders have a value in themselves leads to a loveless competition for self-justification about which the Apostle Paul spoke, presenting it as a twist of faith.[2] A good example of this attitude, according to Yannaras, is 'Pietism',[3] an expression of Protestantism at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century, which understood the Gospel more as a code, as a practice of ethics, or as a moralistic duty and not as an *Ethos* of freedom, which means a mode of life inspired by freedom.[4]

The distinction between the religious and the ecclesial event as a distinction between individualistic and relational existence, or between abstract ideology and salvific experience, is made clear in the issue of faith. Yannaras argues:

> The Church speaks about *faith* in the Greek sense of the word: Belief in Greek means *trust*, and to *believe* means *to trust*. . . . Faith is an experience of a *relationship* and has the dynamic of the relationship. It is continuously conquered without it ever ending. . . . On the contrary, *faith* for the holy Augustine is an individual belief of principles and values.[5]

Yannaras follows the French theologian Marie-Dominique Chenu, pointing out that mental faith as a psychological belief objectifies faith into rules and values, thus turning its experience into an idol. 'Idols' of religiousness are the enemies of the Eucharistic event which makes up Christianity.

The religious event as an objective truth did not avoid being directly influenced by the dominant social, political and cultural relations of its time. Religiousness was expressed inside the feudal world as

1. Ibid., 123.
2. Athanasios Papathanasiou, 'Χαμένοι στην Ἠθική: Στάσεις τῆς Σύγχρονης Ὀρθόδοξης Θεολογίας' ['Lost in Ethics: Stances of Modern Orthodox Theology'] in *Ἡ Ἐπιστροφὴ τῆς Ἠθικῆς [The Return of Ethics]*, ed. Stavros Zouboulakis (Athens: Artos Zois, 2013), 282.
3. Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, 119-36; Christos Yannaras, *Καταφύγιο Ἰδεῶν: Μαρτυρία [Refuge of Ideas: Testimony]* (Athens: Domos, 1987), 119-36.
4. Christos Yannaras, *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite*, trans. Haralambos Ventis et al. (London, NY: T. & T. Clark International, 2005), 32.
5. Yannaras, *Ἡ Εὐρώπη Ἐννήθηκε ἀπὸ τὸ Σχίσμα* [*The Great Schism Engendered Europe*], 130.

a 'conservative theology'. With the passage of time and the rise of liberalism, the absoluteness of religion turned into a liberal stance, with 'theological Kantianism' as its climax. This historical phase, as Taylor claims, 'involves the interiorisation of personhood: it starts with the definition substantia rationalis individual and ends up generating the modern notion of the individual, as monad'.[1]

The historical reaction to both the conservative and the liberal political theology, when the labour movement arose into the mass societies of the industrial revolution worldwide, came from the 'militant' Marxist revolutionary theology, mostly in Latin America and the rest of the colonised world, which opposed abstract universal values with concrete historical action. But for Yannaras, all these historical forms are into the same context of transforming Christianity into a religion when social openness maintains an individualistic basis.

Individualistic religious logic reveals a need for psychological security. Sigmund Freud wrote about different kinds of love. One of them is the kind of love he senses in many persons who attempt to disengage from the pressures of an immediate relationship with others. Many of these people exchange the experience and the need of loving and being loved personally with the experience of a general offer towards the public. In this way they 'transfer' their love to people in general and not to certain persons, where they would risk being rejected.[2] This way of life, which Freud describes as a 'mechanism of overcompensation' is what Yannaras means when he talks about the 'psychological overcompensation of Western Christians' and the 'psychological motives of political theology'.[3] In these cases, love and faith is used as a political ideology for social practice; as a commitment and ethical system.

The Problem of Political and Social Violence

Another issue for political theology is the problem of the relationship between Christian life and political and social violence. Historical oppression and injustice in many cases has led to the development of radical political theologies, such as the theologies of revolution or liberation theologies in Latin America. According to Fr George Metallinos, a Greek theologian, historian, author and professor, radical

1. Taylor, 'The Person', 281.
2. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. Norton & Company Inc., 1962), 48-9.
3. Yannaras, *Κεφάλαια Πολιτικῆς Θεολογίας [Chapters of Political Theology]*, 10.

political theologies are the result of the Western feudal system, which has been particularly cruel to the lower classes and culturally racist. That led to social and political polarisation in Western societies as well as in their colonies. The Roman Catholic Church in some cases took the place of the European feudal elite, sometimes supporting servitude with theological arguments. Moreover, it legitimised colonisation and imperialism as the divine order of things.[1] Fr Metallinos concludes that the revolutionary movement in the European colonies is an effort to restore the theology of the Christian world and discover the true spirit of theology in the Christian Third World, as well as the discovery of the real spirit of Christianity of the Bible in society.[2]

Christos Yannaras recognises the problem of historical violence and the choice for a Christian whether to undertake the responsibility to struggle with the people against a conqueror or an exploiter, or to participate in a common effort with others with the purpose of changing the oppressive political and social structures and establishing liberated social relationships and political institutions. The problem, according to the Greek Christian philosopher, is detected in the fact that the radical political theologies of revolution justify social and political violence with theological arguments. Because of this, political theologies serve the psychological reassurance of individual political choices and hopes. Moreover, Papathanasiou argues, these Christian acts were understood by Yannaras as attempts to replace the ethos of personal endangerment inside the tragic imperfectness of the world through a 'morality' of 'objective reassurance'; for example, through basing revolt on the Bible.[3]

Yannaras' main problem is neither the political stance of these Christians nor the fact that some of them revolt or resort to violence. His problem is with basing and justifying these actions on God's will, on the Holy Scriptures or on Christian traditions. A Christian should know that no psychological or spiritual reassurance exists when he takes the responsibility to act politically and use violence. Taking political responsibility, even through murder, with the purpose of changing social and political structures or of deposing a tyrant, mobilises many Christians in the so-called theologies of revolution and liberation. But

1. George Metallinos, 'Θεολογία Ἐλευθερίας καὶ Θεολογία Ἀπελευθερώσεως' ['Theology of Freedom and Liberation Theology'] in *Τὸ Δικαίωμα τῆς Ἀντίστασης: Δικανικοὶ Διάλογοι III [The Right to Resist: Juridical Dialogues III]*, ed.Kostas Beys (Athens: Kentro Dikanikon Meleton, 1995), 369-70.
2. Ibid., 370-1.
3. Papathanasiou, 'Χαμένοι στὴν'Ηθική' ['Lost in Ethics'], 296-7.

when violent political action of the Christian is based on the Bible or on Christ, argues the theologian and researcher Christine Schliesser, it reaches its highest contradiction.[1]

Yannaras takes the *drama* of political and historical life a bit further. According to him, a Christian cannot take part in violence and murder and wonder if this mode of life is the mode of Christ; for it is not. In violence, people risk their soul, not just their biological existence. However, this is a danger that a believer accepts for the sake of the people, as the price of being one of them and of fighting with them, and not because Christology demands it. As a consequence, even if such a political stance cannot be totally isolated or distinguished from the spirituality and Christology of its actor, it also cannot be based on it, on the Bible or on some moral teaching of the Church.

It is accurate if we claim that the critical position of Yannaras does not reject any political theology but only the one that is 'á priori dedicated to individual claims'.[2] He rejects a political theology that transforms Christianity into an individualistic and egocentric religion and an ideology for specific uses inside the social and political sphere.

Moreover, Yannaras' criticism is not the kind of elitist view that underestimates everyday praxis from the standpoint of an aesthetically superior spirit.[3] His criticism is directed on those social actions of any political theology which although claiming to base themselves on the life of Christ and the Holy Scriptures, they actually have nothing to do with the Eucharistic event. This Christianity ends up as a romantic ideology and a moralistic aretology. Therefore, Yannaras' criticism does not question political theology; it clarifies it.

1. Christine Schliesser, *Everyone Who Acts Responsibly Becomes Guilty: Bonhoeffer's Concept of Accepting Guilt* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 175-205, as cited in Stavros Zouboulakis, 'Ντήτριχ Μπονχαῖφφερ: ἡ Χριστιανικὴ Ἠθικὴ ὡς Ἠθικὴ τῆς Εὐθύνης' ['Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Christian Ethic as an Ethic of Responsibility'] in Zouboulakis, *Ἡ Ἐπιστροφὴ τῆς Ἠθικῆς [The Return of Ethics]*, 345.
2. Yannaras, *Κεφάλαια Πολιτικῆς Θεολογίας [Chapters of Political Theology]*, 10-11.
3. This critical view against Yannaras cited in Papathanasiou, 'Χαμένοι στὴν Ἠθική' ['Lost in Ethics'], 294-5; Marios P. Mpegzos, *Τὸ Μέλλον τοῦ Παρελθόντος [The Future of the Past]* (Athens: Armos, 1993), 86-92; Stavros Zouboulakis, 'Τὸ 'Σύνορο' καὶ ὁ Χρῆστος Γιανναρᾶς. Ἡ Θεολογικὴ Πρόταση τῆς Ἀποηθικοποίησης τοῦ Χριστιανισμοῦ' ['The "Border" and Christos Yannaras: The Theological Proposal of Demoralizing Christianity'] in *Ἀναταράξεις στὴ Μεταπολεμικὴ Θεολογία: Ἡ Θεολογία τοῦ '60* [*Turbulence in Post-War Theology: The Theology of the 60s*], ed. Athanasios Abatzidis et al. (Athens: Indiktos, 2009), 315-26.

Yannaras' Political Theology of the Eucharistic Event

Yannaras, by quoting Khomiakof, argues that 'the political theory of the Church is the truth of the holy Trinity',[1] since ecclesial ethic lies in the secret life of the Eucharistic event. This event is the generative cause and source of Christian ethos, which ontologically transfigures the human person,[2] the community and the polis.[3] Yannaras accepts the communal, social and political change that occurs when human existence responds to ontological originality, which is incarnated as an expression of love's freedom. This freedom will be put at the epicentre of Christian and political life as an event that takes place through the freedom of relationship.

This love is a catholic experience of the human being that transfigures the person's will and the mode of his other life. Distinguished from this experience, according to Yannaras, liberation in Western logic expresses a situation of sentimental love and rational management of egoistic passions that starts and ends with the inner self. Sometimes it is an 'internal' exhaustive fight with and against one's own self and, at other times, it is the 'external' struggle against social and political structures and the attempt to change them, as an expression of individual responsibility towards the world.[4]

However, by the ecclesial logic, the experience of freedom is expressed in history through relationships with others, with nature and with God, and not as a self-referring, individualistic and internal struggle. Human persons don't change first internally and personally and then open themselves to the world; on the contrary, they change inside the relationship, by communicating with the world.

Yannaras detects this change in Christians and their polis in the ecclesial/Eucharistic event, which is the expression of a special mode of being; the Christian act per se. This mode of being does not confine itself within the limits of a Church as a place of liturgy, but it spreads all

1. Yannaras, *Κεφάλαια Πολιτικῆς Θεολογίας* [*Chapters of Political Theology*], 12. Papathanasiou mentions that there are similarities with the views of many Russian orthodox, such as the Metropolitan Anthony Khrapovitsky, Vladimir Lossky or Sofronios of Essex, about the political dimension of the Christian life, in Papathanasiou, 'Χαμένοι στὴν Ἠθική' ['Lost in Ethics'], 289.
2. Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, 16-17.
3. Ibid., 219-23. A similar view is shared by John Zizioulas, the Metropolitan of Pergamos. Zizioulas, 'Θεία Εὐχαριστία καὶ Ἐκκλησία' ['Eucharistic Event and Church'] in *Τὸ Μυστήριο τῆς Θείας Εὐχαριστίας [The Mystery of the Eucharistic Event]* (Athens: Apostoliki Diakonia, 2004), 34.
4. Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, 204.

over the world as a social and political event, in this way becoming the beginning of social, political and cultural transformation and a cause for historical change.[1]

Because of this logic, Yannaras does not criticise the practising of solidarity and social justice,[2] but makes clear that taking care of the hungry, the thirsty, the foreigners, and so on, is an achievement and an indication not of moral behaviour but of a mode of existence, a transfiguration of personality that ripples throughout one's social and political relations.[3] Moreover, Papathanasiou mentions Fr Alexander Schmemann, according to whom the Eucharistic event does not only witness to the world its experience but is also baptised in the world.[4] The teachings of Maximus the Confessor are also similar in this aspect. In addition, Papathanasiou argues that for Fr Dumitru Staniloae, Maximus the Confessor finishes his work with praise for compassion and love for others, setting this task above everything else.[5]

In the same vein, Archbishop of Tirana and all Albania, Anastasios (Yannoulatos), in 1975 stated his famous thesis on political and social life as a 'liturgy after the liturgy'. He called for spreading the Eucharistic experience on everyday life as a kind of ministration, 'with the purpose of liberating humanity from all its demonic structures of injustice, exploitation, agony, loneliness and the creation of a real society that live in love'.[6] This ministration does not mean that the Church must have a political programme for social and institutional structural changes. It is clear for Archbishop Anastasios that the creation or destruction of social structures is a political and not a theological or ecclesial task. In the same vein, Gutiérrez makes clear:

1. Ibid., 216-23.
2. Yannaras was deeply influenced by the Russian Christian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, in Yannaras, *Καταφύγιο Ἰδεῶν [Refuge of Ideas]*, 256-7.
3. Christos Yannaras, *Τὸ Ρητὸ καὶ τὸ Ἄρρητο [The Sayable]* (Athens: Ikaros, 1999), 222. Papathanasiou, 'Χαμένοι στὴν Ἠθική' ['Lost in Ethics'], 295.
4. Athanasios Papathanasiou, 'Η Ἐκκλησία ὡς Ἀποστολή. Ἕνα Κριτικὸ Ξανακοίταγμα τῆς Λειτουργικῆς Θεολογίας τοῦ π. Ἀλεξάνδρου Σμέμαν' ['The Church as a Mission: A Critical Review of the Liturgical Theology of Fr Alexander Schmemann'], *Theology* 80 (2009): 67-108; Papathanasiou, 'Χαμένοι στὴν Ἠθική' ['Lost in Ethics'], 303-4.
5. Fr Dumitru Staniloae, 'Introduction' in *Mystagogy* by Maximus the Confessor, trans. Ignatios Sakalis (Athens: Apostoliki Diakonia, 1973), 48, as cited in Pathanasiou, 'Χαμένοι στὴν Ἠθική' ['Lost in Ethics'], 306-9.
6. Anastasios of Androussa (Yannoulatos), *Ἱεραποστολὴ στὰ Ἴχνη τοῦ Χριστοῦ [The Mission on the Traces of Christ]* (Athens: Apostoliki Diakonia, 2007), 129-32; Papathanasiou, 'Χαμένοι στὴν Ἠθική' ['Lost in Ethics'], 301.

> My purpose is not to elaborate an ideology to justify postures already taken, or to undertake a feverish search for security in the face of the radical challenges that comfort the faith, or to fashion a theology from which political action is 'deduced'.[1]

Freedom of Relationship as a Foundation of Political Practice

According to Yannaras, the ontological potential and the empirical reality of 'freedom of relationship' sets the ontological foundation for the ecclesia as well as for the polis as a community of persons. Theology and Christian life are also characterised as political, among other things, since the common life of the Christians among each other and with others manifests neither the ecclesia as polis, nor the polis as an entirety. In addition, 'freedom of relationship' means that no subjective or objective á priori truth precedes the relationship. Truth manifests itself to the world through the relation. Human persons find their common truth when they freely associate with others, converse with them with honesty and good intentions and without dogmatic ideas and absolute axioms.[2]

The 'freedom of relationship' is expressed by *apophatic rationality*, which Yannaras distinguishes from *cataphatic rationality.* Apophatic rationality refers to people who, as unique persons, meet to manifest in their common life the truth as it results from dialogue and social experience as an exercise in relationship.[3] This rationality is therefore apophatic exactly because it does not establish dogmatic truths and non-negotiable axioms, nor does it pursue domination upon others.[4] The apophatic *Relational Ontology*, according to which the being 'is not', but

1. Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, ix.
2. Christos Yannaras, *Ὀρθὸς Λόγος καὶ Κοινωνικὴ Πρακτικὴ [Rationality and Social Practice]* (Athens: Domos, 2006), 303.
3. Charles Taylor goes so far as to write: 'I become a person and remain one only as an interlocutor', in Taylor, 'The Person', 276.
4. Christos Yannaras, *Ἕξι Φιλοσοφικὲς Ζωγραφιές [Six Philosophical Paintings]* (Athens: Ikaros, 2011), 32. Sotiris Mitralexis argues that, according to Yannaras, 'apophaticism is the stance towards the verification of knowledge . . . and can be defined as "the refusal to exhaust truth in its formulations, the refusal to identify the understanding of the signifier with the knowledge of the signified"' in Sotiris Mitralexis, 'Person, Eros, Critical Ontology: An Attempt to Recapitulate Christos Yannaras' Philosophy', *Sobornost* 34:1 (2012), 35.

'becomes', sets the foundation for theological and political praxis.[1] On the flipside, cataphatic rationality of the individualistic and egocentric logic acts as if the individual possesses the absolute truth of things or as if it has the possibility to conquer it as a result of objective logic (*Ratio*). But the meaning of the polis is manifest as a common *Logos* on the *ecclēsia tou dēmou*, in the public sphere, and not as an individual rationality, produced in the inner-self through intellectual abilities. The person of apophatic rationality opens up to the world on the basis of a continuous relationship of freedom, in constant co-creation and communication with the historical evolution.

These distinct kinds of logic of apophatisism and cataphatisism express distinct modes of life. For Yannaras, if freedom is understood cataphatically, which means as freedom of action in order to fulfil the requests of the individual for its own happiness, then social competition and political struggle is unavoidable. The conflict will either take place in order to acquire more and more consumer goods to serve constantly increasing individual needs, or for the sake of social power and political sovereignty. The egocentrism of individualism cancels the dynamic of freedom in the relationship with the result of intensifying political hostility and class conflict. When a similar individualistic and cataphatic logic appears as an alternative in order to face this social and political division, it will necessarily attempt to level and equate all possibilities of individual fulfilment with the result of restricting or repressing personal liberties.[2]

Individual certainty in the possession of the truth destroys the freedom of the relationship and any critical scrutiny to verify knowledge. Critical scrutiny is only developed through the participation of many in common decisions and through respect. This potential is only possible with apophatic rationality, where freedom is understood as the negation of necessity, as a dynamic of free relationships.[3]

Yannaras considers that the people who seek to live freely will have to live with others in such a way that they are liberated from alienation, which is caused by their natural impulses (e.g. instincts, uncontrolled passions, unconscious impulses) as well as through social and political restrictions (e.g. social and political relations, institutions and collective views).[4] The social and political relationships that promote the unique

1. Christos Yannaras, *Relational Ontology*, trans. Norman Russell (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2011), 112-20.
2. Yannaras, *Ὀρθὸς Λόγος καὶ Κοινωνικὴ Πρακτικὴ [Rationality and Social Practice]*, 280, 290.
3. Ibid., 283.
4. Ibid., 284.

personality of every person, by helping him to exceed the bonds of nature and social restrictions, need to grow and develop through a non-dogmatic and non-individualistic rationality.

Epilogue

Since history never ends, nor is ever utterly fulfilled, and since no one possesses absolute truths, no statement should be rejected in advance. Instead, they should rather be put to scrutiny while they converse with each other. Because of this fact, Yannaras talks about a 'dynamic freedom' of apophaticism. The 'dynamic of freedom' and apophatic rationality should not demand perfection and absolution that anyway do not seem to appear anywhere in our historical existence. Moreover, it is Yannaras' central thesis that people organise their societies according to their needs. Radically different needs lead to different historical solutions.[1] History, society and politics always remain open to creation; always remain apophatic.

In conclusion, the experience of the mystery of 'freedom of relationship' expresses a revolutionary dynamic for the creative reforming of social relationships and political institutions, where each citizen takes his or her own responsibility for this effort. Nothing in this political and historical process can ensure the achievement of personal aims or a definite and successful historical transformation. The revolutionary explosion of collective imagination and creativity grows based on the 'freedom of ethos' alone.[2] The 'freedom of relationship' and the meaning of the mode that originated through this experience sums up the political event as 'polis' for Christos Yannaras. If 'freedom of relationship' refers to a life of trust in God and love for each other inside the polis, then this experience sums up the political theology of Christos Yannaras.

1. Ibid., 293-4.
2. Ibid., 288.