

THE WESTERN GOD

by

Father Michael Azkoul

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In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In his first canon, Saint Basil the Great states that the essential difference between the Church and heresy is "our faith in God." He is saying, if I do not misread him, that "our faith in God" includes not only what we are commanded to believe by God, but what we believe concerning God. In fact, these two ideas cannot be separated. Thus, a Trinitarian and a Unitarian are not talking about the same God. And, also, if I confess that God is one God, my view of history, man and salvation will be different from the man who accepts many gods. In truth, "our faith in God" conditions whatever else I believe.

What I want to discuss here is the Western notion of God. If we remember that the word "God" does not mean the same to everyone, our inquiry begins to have some validity. We should even be more persuaded when we recall the words of the Lord, *"This is eternal life that they may know Thee, the only True God, and Jesus Christ Whom Thou hast sent"* (John 17:3). In other words, there are many false conceptions of God, especially those which ignore Jesus Christ.

To approach this matter from another direction, we must concede that the word "God" does not always express the truth: the word does not always give the reality, but in fact disguises a falsehood. Likewise, if we utter the formula, "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," we may not be confessing a saving truth. To recite a theological phrase is not the same as believing what God demands of us. In the words of Saint Hilary of Poitiers: "Heresy lies not in the word, but in the sense assigned to it" (*De Trin., II, 3*).

What "sense" or meaning is imputed or "assigned" to the words "God" and "Trinity" by the post-Orthodox West? I hope to show that neither acumen nor sincerity may alter the fact that the Western God is not the God of the prophets and the apostles, "the true God" whom Jesus Christ has made known to us. Since its departure from the Church, the West has worshipped the deity of Greek philosophy reshaped to accommodate Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Protestant versions of Christianity.

Is it possible to find where the West turned away from the right doctrine of God? The curious fact is that the source of its idolatry is a bishop of the Church, an African prelate of the fifth century, Augustine of Hippo. A brilliant scholar, with nothing but the best Christian intentions, he fell prey to the enticements of Greek philosophy. Augustine is the prototype of all post-Orthodox Western theologians, that is, by the problems he sought to solve and the method he employed to solve them. His heavy reliance on human reason carried him well beyond the bounds of Holy Tradition.

In particular, we mention the doctrine of analogy, an idea which has been central to the thinking of the West since Augustine was "rediscovered" by Solons and sages of the late Middle Ages. "Analogy" is the belief that God and the world (especially man) may be compared, or as the Scholastics said, all that exists, share in being — albeit God is "the Supreme Being." In other terms, the theory of analogy signifies the abandoning of the traditional "apophatic" or "negative theology" of the Church.

Hopefully, when my time has expired, the point will have been made that the God

of the post-Orthodox West is an idol, the creation of the human imagination. Perhaps, too, you will no longer be intimidated by the persistent argument that, after all, Western Christians (and others) do intend to worship "the true God." Intentions become irrelevant when the truth is ignored or perverted.

Very often we hear people refer to God as "the Man Upstairs" or "the Big Boss" or, thanks to the movies, "the Force," "the Power." Sometimes they employ the language of Western philosophers and describe Him as "the Supreme Being," "the universal Substance," "the Absolute," "the First Cause," "the divine Monad," "eternal Mind," and others. All these names, vulgar or sophisticated, fail to offer the understanding of God found in the prophets, the apostles, and the fathers.

This theological language, however, does imply that human reason is able to make true and useful affirmations about the existence and nature of God. This conviction is based on the unspoken assumption that between God and man some comparison is possible; they are analogous. Indeed, God is perfect, man is not, but they are similar in many ways, according to this theory.. Thus, people say, "God would not do that" or "Why did God allow that to happen?" And, of course, there are questions which bear the same implication: "From where did God come?" or "How can Three Persons be one God?"

We explain such ideas and questions by the theory of analogy, and the blame for this theological innovation we place at the feet of Augustine. Analogy is the very foundation of post-Orthodox Western "cataphatic" or "positive theology." As you know, "positive theology" tells us what God is—"God is good," "God is just," "God is loving," etc. The Church does not accept a "positive theology" which is the product of mere reason. All saving and positive truths about God are revealed, not discovered. But more will be said about this matter later. Let us turn now to the man who set the theological sights of the heretical West.

In order to understand the thinking of Augustine, one needs a working knowledge of Greek philosophy and the philosopher for whom he showed a special affinity; namely, in the school of Plato, Plotinus, the third century A.D. sage of Lycopolis.

As some of you may recall, Plotinus, in common with all Platonists, taught that time imitates eternity. Thus, the laws of eternity are models for the laws of nature. History moved in a circular way, repeating itself: all living things are born, reach their acme and deteriorate. From the ashes, the entire process begins again. Nations are the same. Individuals are the same. Something is coming into being while something passes into nothing, incessantly. Age follows age forever.

Man belongs to time and eternity. His mortal side develops and declines as Nature itself. He has an immortal soul, an aspect of himself which properly belongs to eternity and which, with the expiration of the body, returns to its "homeland." Thus, as Plotinus saw it, salvation is not resurrection *in* the body, but *from* the body.

Interestingly, the God of Plotinus is a Trinity: the One, from Whom proceeds the Nous or Intelligence, and the Spirit Who emanates from both the One and the Nous. In some respects, he was closer to the Church Fathers than Augustine. In his theology of the One, Plotinus is "negative," that is, he asserts that the One is incomprehensible and that reason can tell us only what It is not. The One is "immaterial," "immutable," "infinite," etc.

Although Augustine liked to speak of "the mystery of the Trinity," he did not hesitate to use Plotinus and Greek philosophy in his attempt to explain the Trinity. He built his argument around the Biblical expression, man "the image of God." *On the Trinity* is the

title of his famous book in which he elaborates the notion that the soul of man reflects the Trinity. The soul, he said, consists of Memory, Intellect and Will which correspond to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As Intellect proceeds from Memory, Will proceeds from both, that is to say, as the Son is begotten of the Father, the Holy Spirit is the product of the Father *and the Son*.

You will recognize this theological formula as the celebrated Western teaching on the double procession of the Spirit: from the Father *and the Son* (*filioque*). More importantly, we observe the doctrine of analogy: God and man are comparable, that is, we may know God by a genuine knowledge of man. Augustine had proven, he said; by reason what so many take only on faith.

By the same method and with the same purpose, if I may give another example of Augustinian theology, he pretended to tell us about salvation from the divine perspective. There is no more historically significant teaching for the West than predestination. Although one may be unable to trace the idea that God pre-determined long before the beginning of the world who would be damned and who would be saved directly to Plotinus, nevertheless, Augustine borrowed his principles from the pagan philosopher.

In effect, Augustine says that human knowledge imitates divine knowledge. To understand the way we think is some indication of how God thinks. Therefore, since God knows everything — past, present, and future — what He knows must come to pass as certainly as a valid conclusion follows from a valid premise. God's knowledge is infallible and irrevocable: He cannot know a lie. Necessarily, then, if God knew in eternity that this person would not believe in Christ and, consequently, is damned and if in eternity He knew that this person believed in Christ and is saved, it must happen. Augustine was certain that he had the support of Saint Paul on the matter of predestination.

These are just a few of the ideas and problems that Augustine left to his posterity. Nothing is more important, however, than his use of Greek philosophy, his faith in human reason, his doctrine of analogy. A new conception of God was born.

The greatest heir and successor to Augustine in the post-Orthodox West is Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274). He differed with Augustine in several ways, chief among them a preference for Aristotle over Plato and his school. His *Summa Theologica* and *Summa contra Gentiles* are landmarks of theological literature. Among other things, they established a notion of God which ever since has been identified with the God of Christianity. Using Aristotle and the doctrine of analogy, Thomas clarified and systematized Augustine's speculations.

According to Aquinas, there is no more basic concept than being. All things share in being, even God. All being is created, contingent, imperfect, except God. He is the only "necessary being." He is "the First Cause," the divine motor which supplies energy to the universe and draws it to Him. (Thomas seems to have known nothing about the Uncreated Energies of God about which Saint Gregory Palamas and the Fathers spoke.) Moreover, God possesses all the positive attributes of being — goodness, beauty, justice, holiness, etc. — perfectly or, to use the words of Aquinas himself, "the perfections of being exist in God in a more eminent way than in His creatures"; or, "it has been demonstrated that God prepossesses in Himself all the perfections of creatures, for He Himself is absolutely and universally perfect" (*STh.* q. 13. a. 5).

As you know, an Orthodox never identifies God with Being. The "negative theology" of the Fathers requires us to refer to Him as *byperousios*, "above being." Neither

do we think of God as possessing "attributes," but speak of His "effects." We see what God has done, and believe, as the Scriptures declare, "it was very good." Whatever may be said in a positive way about Him, we receive from Christ, the prophets and the apostles. We understand their words according to the interpretation of the holy Fathers. In other words, Orthodox "positive theology" is a matter of revelation — not philosophical speculation under the auspices of Greek philosophy.

Let me repeat that the theory of analogy, *analogia entis*, is fundamental to the "cataphatic" or "positive theology" of the post-Orthodox West; but Orthodoxy depends wholly on the divine economy, whether of the Old or New Covenant. Likewise, it is true that theology conditions every aspect of religion; hence, Western theology affects everything else a Papist, Anglican, or Protestant believes. It is incontestable that my attitude toward God shapes my view of Christ and man, the Church and history, the mysteries and the saints, law and morality, society and politics, etc. "As a man thinks, so is he."

For a few moments, let us look at the influence of Western theology on popular piety; for example, the Virgin Mary in relation to the Western God during the Middle Ages.

For assistance, let us turn to Henry Adams's famous *Mont Saint-Michel and Chartres* (New York, 1961). He tells us that medieval theology cannot be completely understood without some familiarity with contemporary society. In fact, medieval theology is expressed in terms of feudal society. Therefore, God is Lawgiver, Liege Lord, Sovereign Power, and universal Monarch. He is a God who demands "satisfaction" for "original sin," the great offense to His imperial honor. He is the transcendent God, remote from His subjects. He may be just, but He is stern.

Consequently, the salvation of Christ seemed difficult to attain. One did not share in His Sacrifice on the Cross unless one fulfilled certain laws, did certain deeds, and assented to dogmas and doctrines about which there was often much confusion. Believers turned to the One whom they trusted, because she was like them: the Virgin Mary, "Our Lady." For the Virgin they used as models earthly queens, such as Blanche, mother of Louis IX of France, or Eleanor of Aquitaine, wife of Henry II of England. They influenced their husbands and sons much in the way, the people thought, the Virgin influences God. Blanche and Eleanor were "queen bees," so to speak, wielding power by intelligence and guile. They became analogies of the Virgin Mary, the approachable, reachable, compassionate Queen of Heaven. Henry Adams suggests the people adored her, because, as these earthly queens, the Virgin was not docile. She "spoke up" to the Trinity in their behalf. Thus, as the earthly queen was apparently the only way to reach the earthly king (who was often her son), so the Virgin was their mediator with the Trinity, one of whose members was her Son. She was the only truly and completely human link between heaven and earth.

The Virgin was viewed by medieval Western man as "a real person," says Adams. She was someone whose tastes and wishes, instincts and passions, everyone knew. She was conceived, too, as a sort of "rebel" against restraints of law and convention. She was loving, pitying, strong, even as the earthly queens, even as humanity itself. People attached themselves to her and became, as knights would to Eleanor or Blanche, her *man*, "Mary's sinners." As a reward for their devotion, the Virgin would help them around the law, around authority, human and divine. She understood that sin was not horrendous, but "human."

She protected her people against God, Adams writes, and "she seems often on the point of defending her arbitrary acts of mercy by frankly telling the Trinity that if the Creator meant to punish man, He should not have made him" (p. 258). Her protection had a price, however, because the Virgin was very possessive. She took offense if a man deserted her for another woman. Adams cites a medieval poem (pp. 265-266):

With anger flashing in her eyes answers the Queen of Paradise: "Tell me, tell me! you of old Loved me once with love untold; Why now you throw me aside? Tell me, tell! where a bride Kinder or fairer have you won? ..Wherefore, wherefore, wretched one, Deceived, betrayed, misled, undone Leave me for a creature mean, Me, who am Queen of Heaven? Can you make a worse exchange You that for a woman strange, Leave me who, with perfect love, Wait for you in heaven above ..."

The Virgin could be as unscrupulous in her jealousy as any other "great lady," punishing those who desert her with an unquenchable fury.

With the changing of Western society — especially since the sixteenth century Protestant Reformation — there has been some change in the perception of Mary by Catholics (and some Anglicans and Protestants). She has lost some of her imperious nature, but there seems no way to escape the doctrine or analogy. During the last few centuries, more stress has been placed on her maternity and her intercessory powers. Now we hear pious words about "the Holy Family"—Jesus, Mary, and Joseph — or "the immaculate heart of Mary." In some instances, she has been sentimentalized into "the Virgin of the Woods" or "the Virgin of the Airways."

The West has forgotten that the Mother of God is "more honorable than the Cherubim and beyond compare more glorious than the Seraphim," she who is "above every creature." We Orthodox compare her to no mortal woman, for she, as Saint Gregory Palamas proclaims, "is the boundary between the created and the Uncreated" (*In Dorm. PG 151.472B*). Her sanctity reflects the very holiness of God Himself. We would not dare speak of "jealousy" or "anger" in connection with "the All-holy," *Panagia*. She is deified. No wonder the late Photius Kontoglou insisted that the Orthodox always distinguish between the true *Theotokos* and the Western *Franco-panagia*. False Mariology is the result of a false theology.

It is written, "My Ways are not your ways and My Thoughts are not your thoughts." Here is a basic statement of Orthodox theology. There is no place in it for the philosophical doctrine of analogy. The religions of the West have uncritically assumed that God is "the supreme ontological Principle Who is the Supreme Being, distinct from the world created by Him" (C. Farbo). Such a notion of God is a potpouri of Greek, Latin, and Christian ideas; it is idolatry.

The Orthodox Church teaches that all saving positive theology is revealed. Human reason tells us what God is not, for He "dwells in unapproachable Light," as Saint Paul tells us. He may be compared to nothing, for, according to the Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom, God is "ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, incomprehensible, infinite, and immutable." Moreover, as Saint Dionysius teaches, God transcends all "affirmation... is outside every negation ... free from every limitation and beyond them all."

We know the unknowable God because He has condescended to disclose Himself to us — in nature, through the "heart" (the Orthodox sense), through' the prophets, even through the noble Gentiles (e.g., Job, Plato, Ikhnaton), as Saint Justin Martyr tells us. Of course, the final revelation of God is Jesus Christ. Here is the saving knowledge of God,

the knowledge which alone leads to union with God: "God became man that man might become a god," as the Fathers said.

But why, then, do some deny the existence of God and disdain the mission of Christ? Why idolatry? Because, as Saint John of Damascus wrote, the Devil has prevailed against the atheist and the idolater. The Devil has confused them and turned them, if not to earthly things, if not to idols, then turned them to creatures of their own imagination. In other words, the Western God was born of pride and unrighteousness.

One may not seek to know God as if he were approaching to study the stars or plants or numbers. The Fathers of the Church teach that the knowledge of God is not a subject to be debated, proven and analyzed. Neither does it belong to everyone to discuss it. As Saint Gregory the Theologian wrote in his *Theological Orations 1,4*: Not to everyone, my friends, does it belong to philosophize about God; not to everyone — the subject is not so cheap or low — and, let me add, not before every audience, nor at all times, nor on all points; but on certain occasions, before certain people and always within limits.

The study of theology is not permitted to all men, but only to those who are masters of meditation, and who have been previously purified in soul and body; or, at the very least, are now being purified. For the impure to touch the pure is unsafe, even as it is harmful to fix the gaze of the eyes upon the sun.

We have learned something about the so-called "Christian God" of the post-Orthodox West. He is largely the invention of Augustine and Aquinas. We have said very little about the other Western versions of God, the Unitarian, Pantheistic deities of secular Western culture. In a sense, even these have some relation with their "Christian" cousin. The gods of the philosophers and theosophists may themselves also look to ancient Greece for their origins. The "Supreme Being," "the Absolute," "the Mind," "Substance," etc. are all the products of human reason; indeed, a fallen, unregenerate human reason.

No matter the plea, no matter the sincerity, no matter the quotes from the Scriptures and the Fathers, the "God" of Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, Methodism, Presbyterianism, or the Baptists and Lutherans is an *idol*. Not only is the God they worship conceptually false, but the heretical theologies beget false pieties. I illustrated the connection between theology and piety from Medieval Latin Mariology.

I could have mentioned also the Protestant theology which teaches the Holy Spirit to be acting only on the human "heart," never through any "denomination," and you would understand its individualism and anti-sacramentalism. One might also mention those Western Unitarian religions which declared that God is continuously changing, and therefore Christianity is continuously changing. These religions are historically without ritual, without creeds, without clergy, and are socially very active, as the Quakers are.

But many will protest, saying, that many Western Christians believe in the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Cross, the Grave, the Resurrection, the Sacraments, the Saints, etc. But this protest loses its cogency when we realize that even these doctrines are held by them in the wrong way. False Christology (Christ), false ecclesiology (Church), false Mystagogy (sacraments), etc., follow from a false theology. In other words, God has commanded us to believe certain things in a certain way. Man is allowed to make no alterations.

Let me put my argument another way. If you say to me that you have never met Father. Nektas,¹ nor seen a picture of him; and, if you say, that you wish to visit him, and

¹ Here Father. Michael was referring to Father. Nektas Palassis, the parish priest of St. Nectarios Orthodox Church of Seattle, Washington.

would I tell you where he lives and how he looks and what sort of a fellow is he; and if I reply that he is seven feet tall, weighing three hundred pounds, round faced with a big red beard; and if I said he had a jolly disposition balanced with a bad temper; and, finally, if I told you that he lives in Tacoma, Washington, will you concede to me now that I have not described the real Father. Neketas, although indeed it is he about whom we are both speaking? Will you admit that such a Father Neketas does not exist and that you will never find him, nor commune with him if you believe me?

I may be sincere, but I have not presented you with the picture of the real Father Neketas. In the same way, the Western God, He whom millions of people call "Lord" is an idol, an unreality; although it is the Reality they seek. He is not the God Who established the religion which Christ told us cannot lie and would never pass away — nor it, nor one jot or tittle of it. There is the true God with Whom we must be united, for union with Him is salvation. He is not the God of post-Orthodox Western theology, the idol of the human imagination.