THE CHALLENGE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE: AN ICONIC READING OF CHRIST'S JUDGMENT 'PARABLE'

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Abstract: Once Christian iconoclasts, separating Christ's portrayable humanity from His unportrayable Divinity, denounced all icon veneration as idolatry, or else as mis-emulating a mere man. Today, Christian advocates of secular social justice, separating humans' immanent needs from their Divine vocation, destroy the – as I shall argue – 'icon' of Himself, which Christ identifies in the "least of His brethren" (Mt.25:35f, 40, 42f, 45). They do so either by idolizing a purely secular human dignity or by prioritizing physical and psychological support in ways that impede their deifying access to the "word of God" (Mt. 4:4).

Defending icons, St. John Damascene recalls discursive images the Holy Scriptures evoke, as indispensable for the Divine Self-revelation. This essay explores the challenge inherent in such Self-revelation, given the – as one can call it - strategic darkness surrounding Christ's parables (Mt. 13:12-15). Only the existentially 'investing' response of a properly receptive heart (cf. Mt. 13:19) can protect His audience, and, so this essay argues, also the beholders of His images, both painted and evoked for the 'inner eye', against the error of separating the finite 'medium' from the infinite 'message', and against falsely imputing as well as actually committing idolatry.

Keywords: *Parables, images, iconoclasm, idolatry, secular solidarity*

1. Introduction: Public Welfare and the Decline of Worship

In the West, social solidarity and egalitarian claim rights are hailed as Christianity's lasting contribution to the moral progress of humanity.

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Christ's Judgment 'parable'¹ (Mt. 25:31-46) here places Orthodoxy in the defensive: service to those in need appears no longer as a (necessary) condition for access to eternal life. Instead, the Christian mission is taken primarily to revolve around such service (designating it as sufficient for attaining salvation). Christianity thus becomes a welfare project, e.g., getting the hungry fed. The focus on efficiency highlights the role of scientific-technological progress. 'Visiting' the sick is replaced by publicly financed healthcare that promises healing. For many, 'Christianity' therefore prominently engages the 'social welfare' state. From such a perspective, traditionally Orthodox countries appear deficient. Excuses invoking centuries of Muslim (Tartar) suppression and Communist persecution remain unpersuasive: even under Russia's Christian Emperors, access to reliable food supplies, housing, and health care had not consistently benefitted Christ's 'least brethren'.

Many Orthodox today feel the sting of that reproach. Since robustly Christian governance is no longer an option, any nostalgia for state supported *Basileias* appears misplaced. This is why Orthodox writers, even when composing official documents for the Church², sometimes support their heterodox brothers' call for ever more 'social justice' in providing such access. They advocate publicly funded services emulating the solidarity networks established in the secular West³.

Surely, every neighbor-loving Christian will rejoice about social settings (like in Germany today), where no one needs to go hungry, naked, without shelter or access to state of the art healthcare. The question still

¹ Leaving aside the unique features (cf. St. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Homilies on the Gospel of St. Matthew*, transl. G. Prevost, Paul Schaff (ed.), = NPNF; 1st series, vol. 10, Peabody Mass., Hendrickson, 1955, p.475), our discussion focuses on the images evoked and on Christ's reflection on image-teaching (Mt. 13:12-15).

² Cf. e.g. *Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, 2000, <http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/3/14.aspx>, (accessed April 2017), C-1, cf. also B-2, F-2, 4).

³ Such conformity is surprising, given available Orthodox alternatives, e.g. Sergei BULGAKOV, "Social Teaching in Modern Orthodox Theology" in RowannWilliams (ed.) *Towards a Russian Political Philosophy*, Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1999, p 282., or Paul EVDOKIMOV, "The Church and Society", in Michael Plekon & Alexis Vinegradov (eds.) *In the World, Of the Church*, Crestwood NY, St. Vladimir's, 2001, p. 61-94, p. 73ff.

remains whether Christians should embrace public welfare, as offered by the secular state today. Western social democracies, after all, with all their institutionalized caretaking, are declining in Christian worship. Is this a mere coincidence? Does it result from independent secularizing forces, against which the welfare state bravely upholds its own, secularity-embracing Christian faithfulness as a prophetic foretaste of “Christ’s kingdom?”

This essay proposes an iconic reading of the judgment parable, which exposes the either idolatrous or else iconoclast implications besetting any Christian investment in the secular welfare state. It concludes that the secular quest for ‘social justice’ is indeed a contributing factor in the decline of Christian worship. It should not be adopted by the Church.

2. Icon Veneration, Iconoclasm, Idolatry – a Short Review

In his defense of icon veneration, St. John Damascene compares painted images with the discursive images evoked by Holy Scripture⁴. Without such images, he argues, created humans cannot even start to lift their fallen, earth-bound minds to the Divine transcendence. That such access is what God Himself encourages becomes clear from the images even He uses when revealing His Divine will.

That same will, of course, also prohibits any ‘making of images’ (op.cit. pp. 21ff). The God Who reveals Himself through human images like ‘Father’, ‘Maker’ or ‘Lord’, will not allow material (here in particular sculptured, pagan style-) images to come between His Self-revelation and humans’ worshipful response. Legitimate (discursive) images are recognized as evincing God’s condescending mercy, His reaching out to created man’s limited abilities. These images are read as a reference, meant to both disclose and veil. They are received as an incentive, encouraging humans to focus their longing on a God Who supplies images as stepping stones, as training devices for purifying the mind⁵. Illegitimate images result from independent human creativity, serving as self-designed placeholders: they display what humans symbolize as

⁴ St. JOHN DAMASCENE, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, engl. transl. A. Louth, Crestwood NY, St. Vladimir’s, 2003, p. 40, 45, 93, 98f.

⁵ St. JOHN DAMASCENE, *Three Treatises...*, p. 26, 96

‘divine’ according to their own, immanence-ridden purposes and desires. While claimed as referents towards transcendence, they function as idols⁶, even as magical devices. They bear witness to a human illusion of self-sufficiency (even religiously enhanced self-sufficiency), which obstructs, rather than facilitates, access to the Divine.

It is because painted icons of Christ function like the discursive images ratified by the Divine Self-revelation, rather than like pagan idols, that they are accepted by the Church, and celebrated as her triumph. Their legitimacy rests on the recorded Divine revelation of man’s creation “according to the image”, in fact, according to Christ as the primary Divine icon, of God⁷. Christ here provides the (pre-incarnation) invisible prototype, after Whom visible man was formed⁸. When painted icons present Christ with a human face, they do not seek to make Him look like a mere man, i.e. to humanize Him. Instead, the image recalls how man was created to look ‘like’ the Divine prototype, as it would become visible in the incarnation⁹. Just like the discursive images God uses when revealing His will in human terms, inviting humans to use such images when turning to Him in worship, so the icons of Christ reveal the God-man, inviting humans to enter into Christ’s God-manhood by becoming His followers¹⁰.

3. The Iconic Character of ‘the Least’ of Christ’s Brethren

Modern social democracies, supported by flourishing market economies, have been able to satisfy most members’ basic physical and psychological needs. Modern public health care can prevent or alleviate much physical and psychological suffering. So far, so good.

What gets lost in such settings is the judgment parable’s repeated emphasis (Mt.25:35f, 40, 42f, 45) on Christ Himself getting served. Some scholars take Christ’s identifying with the “least of His brethren” well-nigh literally. In pre-revolution Tsarist Russia, the Church, severely

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 20.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 47, 98.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 22, 24.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 24f, 27f. Cf. Cf. Paul EVDOKIMOV, *The Art of the Icon*, transl. S. Bigham, Redondo Beach Ca., Oakwood, 1996, p. 180.

limited in her freedom, was sometimes accused of prioritizing eternal life issues and neglecting her care for needs here and now¹¹. Many Orthodox therefore initially welcomed Communism, hoping for a focus on the “incarnate Christ” as present in the poor of this earth. Such a vision (to say the least) abstracts from some crucial differences: the beggar stretching out his cardboard cup at the door of a church is a sinner. He ‘is’ not the Word of God incarnate Whose resurrection overcame the power of death and re-opened the way of holiness for fallen mankind.

This contrast undergirding Christ’s identification with those in need suggests an iconic reading: the human features depicted by the painted icon of Christ are meant to re-direct to our worship to the God Who became man in order that man could become god through grace¹². Likewise, Christ’s parable can be read as re-directing our charitable care for the sufferer bearing such human features to Christ Himself. He, after all, had charitably turned to mankind suffering from the power of death. Such re-directing, as St. John Chrysostom specifies, transforms the charitable act into an offering of gratitude¹³. Here the Saint distinguishes three aspects:

- a) the material help and effort expended for the person in need merely returns to Christ ‘His own’,
- b) such expenditures focus on Christ “being at once friend, and benefactor, and Lord”, and
- c) they respond to His promises of “a heaven, and a kingdom, so great honor”.

Such gratitude recalls that Christians have been ‘bought’ at a high price (1.Cor.6:20). Moreover, as the icon of Christ’s descent into Hades illustrates, they have been liberated by a grip around the wrist that underscores their new (in fact, liberating) ‘enslavement’ to Christ. The offer of gratitude to the One Whom the Evangelist introduces as the

¹¹ Cf. e.g. Michael MEERSON-AKSENOV, “The people of God and the pastors” in Michael Meerson-Aksenov et al. (eds.), *The political, social, and religious thought of Russian “Samizdat” – An Anthology*, Belmont Mass., Norland, 1977, p. 511-541, p. 527.

¹² St. ATHANASIUS OF ALEXANDRIA, *On the incarnation of the word*, transl. A Robertson, in Paul Schaff & Henry Wace (eds.) *NPNF* 2nd series, vol. 4, Peabody, Mass, Hendrickson, 1995, p. 36-67, p 65).

¹³ John CHRYSOSTOM, *Homilies...*, p. 475ff.

‘Word of God’ (Jn. 1:1) therefore prominently implies an offering of obedience to that same word. Or, since there is nothing humans can do ‘for Christ’, all their worship, asceticism and almsgiving reduce to therapies meant to support that offering¹⁴.

Once Christian charity is thus understood as an offering of gratitude in obedience, it will be placed under important side constraints. It will be

- d) limited in view of Christ’s wish “that all be saved” (1.Tim 2:4),
- e) framed not as a purely human achievement but as a cooperative response, invited by the primary Divine offer of grace, and
- f) offered in terms of a personal, selfless sacrifice which, by emulating Christ’s own kenotic love, invites those who can never be expected to reciprocate in kind into the partnership of interceding for their helpers.

4. Distortions involved in State Sponsored Secular Welfare

The secular welfare state discounts all three of these constraints. This disregard surfaces most prominently in that state’s focus on technological progress in health care. As funded by the state, such care

- a) extends to perceived ‘needs’ (e.g. abortion, contraception for the un-married, heterologous insemination, sex change therapies, arbitrary brain death definitions facilitating organ transplantation, pharmaceuticals using tissue from aborted fetuses) which implicate both beneficiaries and providers in sin;
- b) is placed under a secular requirement of non-discrimination and protection of ‘spiritual privacy’, which prohibits any attempt at integrating care for bodily and psychological suffering into care for spiritual suffering, even in Christian health centers;
- c) imposes on caretakers a professionalized attitude which discourages recipients’ adopting their own iconic role through gratitude and intercession.

¹⁴ St. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, “Homily ten; Sermon on Almsgiving”, transl. G.G. Christo, in *St. John Chrysostom on Repentance and Almsgiving*, Washington DC, Catholic University of America Press, 2005, p. 131-149, p. 141.

Even more, such public welfare has misleading implications of its own. One of these results from the fact that, as politically implemented, such welfare presupposes redistributive policies. The implied interference with private property gets justified by reference to a robustly immanent ‘human dignity’. Here exposure to ‘needs’ is ‘remedied’ through recognized claim rights to social relief. Secular ‘dignity’, in encouraging human self-development and self-fulfillment, hinges on the availability of material and social resources. Even more, respect for such dignity imposes on society the task of evening out any unequal, and therefore ‘unfair’, starting positions in the competition for such resources. There is no limit to the scope of ‘basic needs’ grounding entitlements. The Christian egalitarianism of human fallenness and redemption is replaced with an egalitarianism of unquenchable envy. By focusing on purely immanent concerns which invite such envy, secular social justice spiritually and morally hurts those it seeks to benefit.

In a proper Christian context, of course, ‘rights to support’ are also affirmed. But instead of authorizing the poor to establish claims against the rich, Orthodox ‘social justice’ appeals to the latter. They are encouraged to attribute ‘rights to relief’ to those suffering from need. Such encouragement, moreover, invokes a Divine authority which invites both rich and poor into discerning how much is ‘enough’ (2.Cor. 8:15).

The exclusively this-worldly focus secular social justice imposes on service-providers recalls Christ’s first temptation (Mt. 4:1-11)¹⁵. Like such justice, so the devil’s humanitarian project of turning stones into bread is deceptive. Both seem to leave space for ‘word-of-God’ concerns, once everyone’s physical hunger is satisfied. Christian hospitals in Europe, just as secular hospitals in Germany, sustain additional pastoral care departments for clients willing to ask for complementary soul-care. If Christ’s rebuttal „Man does not live on bread alone” (Mt. 4:4) is to present a viable alternative, it must target the implied ‘hierarchy of needs’. Two chapters later, His teaching upsets the devil’s priorities: “First care for the kingdom of God and its justice” (Mt. 6:31-34).

In the example of health care cited above, such a reversal would

¹⁵ Sergii BULGAKOV, “The Soul of Socialism”, in Rowan Williams, *op.cit.* p. 229-268, p. 250: “Satan ... can wrap himself in the garment of social justice.”

implement the side constraints of obedience invoked above. It would

- a) limit publicly supported services so as not to trespass Divine prohibitions;
- b) allow Christian providers to combine health care with missionary outreach; and thus
- c) invite recipients into contributing their own share to the ‘kingdom of God’ thus anticipated.

Indeed, the judgment parable associates access to that prioritized kingdom with care for humans’ basic (i.e. physical and psychological) needs. But an iconic reading of Christ’s declared Self-investment in such care can disqualify the exclusive focus on this-worldly ‘basic needs’. On such a reading, the Christian endorsement of secular social justice can be recognized as perverting the icon of Christ in those it claims to serve. This perversion either replaces that icon by the idol of a purely immanent human dignity, extolling secularization as the historical telos of Christianity¹⁶. Or else that perversion implies an inverted iconoclasm: While the iconoclasts of old had invoked Christ’s divine transcendence against what they wrongly imputed as idolization of the materiality of, and the humanity depicted on painted icons¹⁷, today’s social justice iconoclasts invoke Christ’s incarnate presence in suffering humans against what they wrongly impute as Christianity’s undue preoccupation with spiritual issues and empty promises for eternal life.

5. The Ambivalence of Images

Images, as St. John Damascene insisted, are core to the Divine Self-revelation. Why, then, are they so profoundly misunderstood by those whom they were meant to support? Why do they tempt even Christians into idolatries and iconoclastic heresies?

The answer lies in the intended darkness of Christ’s teaching: “Though hearing, they do not hear or understand” (Mt. 13:13). Such harshness in the God of love becomes understandable from the sower parable occasioning Christ’s remarks. His disciples, left clueless about

¹⁶ Cf. the critique by Sergii BULGAKOV, “Heroism and the Spiritual Struggle”, in Rowan Williams, *op.cit.*, p. 55-112, p. 101.

¹⁷ DAMASCENE, *Three Treatises...*, pp 42f, 69ff, 153.

it's meaning like everybody else, differ from the crowd by taking the trouble to ask. It is by turning to Christ for instruction, that they reveal their heart to have been properly prepared in just the way which the parable praises, and opposes to those who resign themselves to not-understanding (Mt. 13:19), who offer a merely superficial reception (Mt. 13:21), or who submit to distraction by the cares of this life (Mt. 13:22). Christ, after all, is Himself that very 'Word of God' (Jn. 1:1), whose prophecy of the kingdom (Mt. 13:19) the sower 'sows'. Rendering oneself receptive to His word is to receive Christ Himself. The failures the parable enumerates thus recall the rejection of Christ in person which John invokes in 1:11 "He came unto His own, and His own received Him not". Such rejection prominently issued from the very scribes and Pharisees, who had been put in charge of the Word of God, as revealed in the Scriptures. By isolating the literal teaching of the law from its spirit¹⁸, they had rendered themselves unable to recognize Christ as the referent of the revealed Messiah-image. Instead, they turned that image into a political idol which catered to their own class interests (Mt. 13:34). It is because of their presence in His audience, that the darkness of Christ's parable-teaching makes sense. It imposes a hurdle that separates (cf. Mt. 10:34-36) 'His own' from His opponents.

Once the 'seed' is 'read' as the word of God's kingdom Who is Christ, the hoped-for harvest depends on 'readers' willingness, by seeking enlightenment from Christ Himself, to accept Him into their hearts (cf. Jn. 14:23). In the case of icons of Christ, the centrality of such a personal reception becomes compelling from the way in which they 'look back': both painted icons and persons in need, once recognized as icons of Christ, confront their beholder with the challenge of a personal encounter. He finds himself encouraged and strengthened, but also judged, and called to account. In either case, that encounter offers an invitation onto the 'Way', as which Christ identifies Himself (Jn. 14:6). In the case of painted icons, this way offers the communion of worship, while in the case of the discursively evoked icon of the judgment parable, it promises fellowship in Christ's kenotic love.

Images, whether offering an iconic likeness of their own or not, whether sensibly visible or discursively evoked for the 'intellectual eye',

¹⁸ St. J. DAMASCENE, *Three Treatises...*, p. 22.

present venues¹⁹ through which the un-created, deifying energies of the transcendent God reach over into created immanence. They ask for a freely offered, and appropriately receptive, response. Humans' response to such images thus indicates their receptivity to the Divine offer of grace. This is what renders those images so divisive, and their impact so deeply ambivalent.

But if all turns on either accepting or rejecting Christ Himself, why could icons become a temptation (towards iconoclasm and idolatry) even for those who see themselves as Christ's followers, and as His very 'own'? The second sower parable (Mt. 13:24-27) uses the sower's good seed as image for the sons of the kingdom (i.e. the ones proclaiming the kingdom). Onto the field receiving those sons, the world, the enemy has thrown his own (Mt. 13:38). Trying to weed out the second would also uproot the first (Mt. 13:39). This is how both idolatrous perverters and iconoclast destroyers of icons could keep mistaking themselves as belonging to the Church, and this is how those who idolize a purely immanent human dignity²⁰, or who destroy the icon of Christ in the ones whom secular social justice seeks to benefit today, can keep mistaking themselves for followers of Christ²¹.

Conclusion: The Triumph of Orthodoxy as Invitation

An iconic reading of Christ's identification with 'the least of His brethren' in the judgment parable reveals the distracting implications of secular social justice. These implications suggest that the pursuit of such justice exerts a secularizing force of its own. The fact that Western social democracies suffer from a decline in Christian worship can thus – at least in part – be attributed to the idolatry and iconoclasm marking that pursuit²².

¹⁹ EVDOKIMOV, *The Art...*, p 178: "The icon is ... the vehicle of a personal presence".

²⁰ S. BULGAKOV, "Heroism...", p. 79, 81f.

²¹ S. BULGAKOV, "Heroism...", p. 101f.

²² While in 1967, Evdokimov was still fully supportive of the heterodox endorsements of secular social justice with some merely Christian overlay ("The Church ...", p. 89ff), in 1970 (*The Art...*, p. 61) he criticizes the laicized and secularized eschatology of our days. For an assessment of such Christian overlay in a communist context, see A. KOSELOV, "Gift and Responsibility; in Meerson-Aksenov, op.cit. p. 542-556, p. 545, 564f.

That same iconic approach has highlighted the invitation into personal fellowship with Christ, whether in view of prayerful communion or in view of practiced charity. As St. John Damascene insisted, a properly ‘existential’ response to the images engaged for the Divine Self-revelation is required also for rightly understanding the Divine word in Holy Scriptures. Already here all turns on an encounter with the person of Christ in that word. Such an ‘existential’ investment can discourage any merely theoretical approach to those Scriptures. It can protect against any attempt, in a cognitively objectifying manner, to separate His Divinity from His humanity. A proper focus on the word of God as the Divine-human person of Christ thus repudiates the rationalism which, in various ways, has undergirded the distortion of icons, both painted and discursively evoked. Such a focus safeguards against both temptations:

- a) to idolize the (‘medium-’ like) material and finite as separate (superstitiously manipulable or morally absolutized) carrier of some stipulated ‘divine power or authority (message)’ or
- b) to engage in an iconoclast disparagement of the material and finite as separable (‘medium’) from a remote, purely transcendent, and for that very reason in effect impotent, ‘divine’ (message).

It is this separation, diagnosed by Sergii Bulgakov²³, against which the Church must still uphold her ‘triumph of Orthodoxy’. Here a word of consolation is helpful. Even though the darkness of Christ’s parables was designed to discourage a corrupt religious elite, it did not condemn anyone to incomprehension. Some visitors would overcome the hurdle and ask for personal guidance (Jn. 3:1-21, Mk. 12:29). Likewise, St. John Chrysostom takes even the devil’s weeds to be eligible for salvation: repenting, they can have their weed-genes re-programmed into God’s good grain²⁴. The triumph of Orthodoxy today consists in its missionary eagerness to invite such return, even among the idolators of immanent human dignity and the iconoclasts of the image of Christ in those whom their social justice seeks to benefit.

²³ Sergii BULGAKOV, *Icons and the Name of God*, engl.transl. B. Jakim, Grand Rapids Mi, Willam B. Erdmans, 2012, p. 16.

²⁴ ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Homilies ...*, p. 289.

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