

## Augustinianism & Postmodernism

By W. J. Whitman

“In the European West, Christianity gradually became transformed into humanism. For several centuries the God-man became more and more limited and confined to His humanity, eventually becoming the infallible man of Rome and of Berlin. Thus, on the one hand there appeared a western Christian humanistic maximalism (the papacy) which took everything away from Christ, and on the other hand a western Christian humanistic minimalism (Protestantism) which sought very little if anything from Christ. In both man takes the place of the God-man as that which is of most value and is the measure of all things.... In essence, western Christianity is fundamentally humanistic since it has declared man infallible, thus transforming the theanthropic religion into a humanistic one.”

—St. Justin Popovich<sup>1</sup>

Since the time of St. Augustine, the Western approach to “theology” has always been essentially *humanistic*. The epistemic center is the individual man: “man is the measure of all things.” (Protagoras) Augustine was a Neo-Platonist, following in the tradition of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus. These Greek thinkers employed a method of philosophism,<sup>2</sup> holding that one could reason themselves to the ultimate truth—that man could *climb up* to discover ultimate religious and metaphysical realities (e.g. the nature of “God” and “being”) through his own discursive reasoning. If you want to do “theology” in the West, you just have to sit down and think about God “logically.” An understanding of philosophy is a prerequisite to “theology.” This is the exact opposite of the Eastern Christian approach.

The Eastern approach is *theanthropic*. The epistemic center is the God-man: Christ is the measure of all things. In order to do theology, you have to join yourself to the God-man—you have to become one with Christ. *Theosis* is a prerequisite for theology. You can’t speak about God authoritatively unless you are one with Him. “God became man so that man might become God,” as the early Christian saying goes. One must be incorporated into Christ’s body and become one with Him before one can have any real epistemological footing. This is not a metaphor or an abstract concept; it is a metaphysical reality.

Being a follower of the Neo-Platonist philosophism, Augustine made himself (that is, his personal understanding) the ultimate basis of his “theology.” God had to be a comprehensible concept: He had to fit into the rational framework of Neo-Platonic philosophy. Human reason was the standard that God had

---

<sup>1</sup> St. Justin Popovich, *Orthodox Faith and Life in Christ*, “Highest Value and Last Criterion in Orthodoxy”

<sup>2</sup> I use the term “philosophism” abstractly. In my vocabulary, *philosophism* is to philosophy what *economism* is to economics.

to meet. Philosophism starts with autonomous human reason and attempts to prove the existence of God *but it also tries to define Him according to the categories of human reason.*

Humanistic philosophism will start off with a basic logical proposition. For example, Aristotle's *first cause* or *unmoved mover*: [premise 1] everything in the world is in motion, and [premise 2] nothing moves until something sets it in motion, therefore, [conclusion] the chain of causation must be able to be traced back to some point when a *first cause* set all other things in motion. This is the basic theistic argument from Aristotle.<sup>3</sup> This theoretical *first cause* is “obviously” God. Here Greek philosophy vindicates the monotheistic idea. God is defined as “first cause” and the very concept of *first cause* implies singularity. Thus, there can only be one God. And the doctrine of *absolute simplicity* follows from this (as Aristotle, Plotinus, and Augustine affirm). If God is one, then He must be *absolutely simple*—i.e. He can have no diversity within Himself. Everything that can be attributed to, or predicated about, God has to be synonymous with the very essence of God. His *will* is synonymous with His *thoughts*, His *thoughts* are synonymous with His *action*, His *action* is synonymous with His *essence*. In other words, to desire, to think, and to act are synonyms when these things are spoken of God. What God *thinks* and what God *does* are coterminous with what God *is*. If this were not the case, then God would not be one. If God's *knowledge* and *will* are separate and distinct things, then there is diversity (or a multiplicity of things) within God. But it has already been “logically” proven that God must be one, therefore His *knowledge* and His *will* must be coterminous. If that is the case, then determinism logically follows. For God to *know* that such-and-such will happen is the same as for God to *will* that such-and-such will happen. Moreover, since His *acts* are coterminous with His *thoughts* and His *will*, it follows that not only does God *desire* everything that He *knows* about but also that He *actively causes* everything that happens. The determinism of Augustine (and later of Cornelius Jansen and John Calvin) was the “logical” result of the humanistic philosophism that is at the heart of Western Christianity.

This philosophism could be carried further. God *created* the world, and God's *act* of creation is synonymous with His *being*, therefore all of creation is God. God *knows* what He is not, and to *be* and to *know* are the same for God, so God *is* what He is not; hence, God is not God. The “Christian atheism” of Paul van Buren and John Shelby Spong is a “logical” consequence of Augustinianism. This “atheistic theology” is the successor of the Protestant *neo-orthodoxy* and *liberal theology*. The “neo-orthodox” and “liberal” theology should really be taken together as a single phenomenon, in spite of the supposed critique of *liberalism* by *neo-orthodox* writers. Friedrich Schleiermacher and Karl Barth have a lot more in common than either of them have with “mainstream” Christianity. Barth studied theology at a university that advocated *liberal theology*, and he studied under Adolf von Harnack, the quintessential

---

<sup>3</sup> I do not think that it is a valid argument, but I am not concerned with that here.

“liberal theologian.” The *existentialist theology* of Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich can be lumped in with this *liberal/neo-orthodox* phenomenon.

There is a tendency among Reformed Protestant thinkers to make a connection between Eastern Orthodox apophatics and *liberal neo-orthodoxy*. This is erroneous. *Liberal neo-orthodoxy* and its use of “the apophatic method” appear to be akin to the apophatics of Eastern Orthodoxy but they are actually antithetical. The Orthodox use the apophatic method because they do not believe that we can systematically rationalize the Deity. The advocates of *neo-orthodoxy* and *liberal theology*, on the other hand, are Augustinians. They maintain the rigorous philosophical method of the West, the Augustinian philosophism, but they have pushed this rationalism to the point of scientism. They exclude the possibility of the non-rational. This is why they deny the possibility of miracles. Everything in the world follows a rational causal chain. God cannot intervene in the material world and interrupt this rational chain of events. The possibility of a transcendental *Creator* is excluded. To be sure, they will refer to “God” as “transcendent” but they mean something totally different from the traditional understanding: they mean by this that God is “absolutely other” in the sense that He stands apart from the material world and “never the twain shall meet.” They are affirming an ultimate scientism. Their apophatics reflects *this* “transcendence,” which is altogether opposed to the *transcendence* of God that is found in historical religious thought. The true apophatics of Eastern Orthodoxy maintains that man through humanistic reason cannot *climb up* to God autonomously, whereas *neo-orthodox liberal* apophatics maintains that God cannot *come down* to meet man. And the *neo-orthodox* hold this view because they wish to affirm the total autonomy of man and humanistic reason—they want to exclude the possibility of God getting in the way of their humanistic, rationalistic philosophizing. In actuality, *neo-orthodoxy* is anti-Orthodox. It is the negation of Christianity. Paul Tillich was right to assert that atheism is justified in its revolt against the “theological theism” of Western Christendom. The “God” of Western “theology” is something that really ought to be rejected. The authoritarian “God” of Anselm and Edwards is antithetical to the true God of Eastern Christendom.

The irrationalism of the “Pentecostal” and “charismatic” movements is a revolt against the philosophism of Western Christianity. The insanity of the “charismatics” is the natural result of Augustinianism. Western Christianity has become so rational that it has cracked—its rationalism drove it mad. The random screams, ecstatic convulsions, spontaneous babbling and chaos that characterizes “revivalist” worship services are the consequence of philosophism. By rationalizing and philosophizing and building up dogmatic systems in order to comprehensively know everything about the infinite (and hence incomprehensible) God, Western civilization has quite literally driven itself insane! The Orthodox, on the other hand, are not irrational or anti-rational like the “Pentecostals;” rather, they limit the role of rational philosophy by putting it in its proper place.

Western philosophy is cumulative: it starts with the ancient Greek philosophers and *builds upon* them. The ideas of Plotinus follow from those of Plato and Aristotle, and the ideas of Augustine follow from those of Plotinus, and Aquinas and Calvin built their systems upon Augustine. But this is equally true of Western secular philosophy. The rationalism of Rene Descartes is based upon Aristotle-Augustine, the empiricism of John Locke is based upon Descartes, the skepticism of David Hume is a logical consequence of Descartes-Locke, and Friedrich Nietzsche's nihilism is the result of Hume's system. Each step in the ladder of Western philosophy is built upon those who came before, and each step moves further away from God. Marxism is philosophically based in Thomism, though it may seem counterintuitive. R. H. Tawney was correct in his assertion that "Karl Marx was the last of the scholastics." And Francis Schaeffer was correct when he said, "The Marx-Engels form of communism should properly be regarded as a Christian heresy."<sup>4</sup> The Hegelian progressivism and determinism at the heart of Marx's ideology is borrowed from Augustinianism. The relativism, amoralism, and irrationalism of the modern "postmodern" world is a logical consequence of the development of Augustinian "theology" to its ultimate conclusion. The atheism of the Soviets and their Gulag system is nothing more than the fallout of Western "theology." Augustinian theology, when it is taken to its ultimate logical conclusion, leaves you with no values, no epistemological basis for reason, and with no God.

At what point do you arbitrarily break away from the old philosophism? The medieval "theologians" systematized philosophism into *scholasticism*. But Thomas Aquinas, the great scholastic, refused to follow the "logic" to its logical conclusion. He carried the pagan tradition so far, but refused to admit the determinism that followed. John Calvin carried the logic further and accepted the determinism, but refused to embrace the atheism. But the notion of *absolute simplicity* was always a stumbling block. Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin struggled to reconcile the notion of *absolute simplicity* (the notion that there is absolutely no diversity in God) with the doctrine of the Trinity, which states that there is diversity in God. To this day, *absolute simplicity* is a "theological" problem, a troublesome doctrine. Cornelius van Til struggled with it too. Recently, certain Western Christian philosophers have departed from the Western Christian tradition; Alvin Plantinga and William Lane Craig have thrown out the doctrine altogether! Thomas Aquinas accepted *absolute simplicity* but drew the line at *determinism*—that is where he cut off the philosophism. Aquinas would not admit determinism. But John Calvin accepted the determinism that logically follows from Western "theology." And the *determinism* itself has been another stumbling block. John Calvin, Cornelius van Til, and Gordon Clark struggled with the doctrine of *determinism* because it could not be reconciled with the experience of *free will*, just as *absolute simplicity* cannot be reconciled with the doctrine of the Trinity. Personally, I think that we should cut the philosophism off at the start. Humanism must be rejected: man is not the measure of all things. Human

---

<sup>4</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who is There*, § 1, Chapter 5

reason is not infallible. The ultimate truths of religion and metaphysics cannot be systematized. We must realize that man is not the measure of all things, that man is limited, and that God can be known only if He deigns to reveal Himself.