

## THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION OF THE CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ETHICS (My personal scholarly journey and biblical contribution)

*Petros Vassiliadis\**

Ethics in general, and social ethics in particular, were not considered in the early Christian community as autonomous norms or abstract and general ideals, to be applied to the society at large. They were only treated, especially in St. Paul, as consequences of the “*new creation*” (*καινή κτίσις*). That is why all radical demands, like “*there is neither Greek nor Jew, neither free nor slave, neither male nor female*” (Gal 3: 26) or “*there will be no needy among you*” (Acts 2) etc., were addressed not outwards, to the Greco-Roman society, but inwards, to the Christian community itself. Unless one undergoes the experience of the early Christian community, one is unable to apply to one’s life and to the life of the society these norms.

The recently produced document “For the Life of the World: Towards a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church”, a powerful social document to navigate Orthodox Christians in a post-modern world through very often perplexing and difficult times, a document that was meant to contextualize the decisions of the Holy and Great Council, is an encouraging initiative of the Orthodox Church, which also deals with current anthropological issues.<sup>1</sup>

St. Paul was not indifferent to the secular ethical ideals as such. In his epistle to the Philippians *e.g.* there is an extensive list of virtues, which reminds us of the stoic ethical ideals. However, Paul allows only a critical consideration (“ταῦτα λογίζεσθε”) to “*all that is true and noble, right and pure, lovable and attractive, and whatever is excellent and worthy of praise*” (4:8); his emphasis (“ταῦτα πράσσετε”) is undoubtedly on the Christian/ecclesial tradition: “*put into practice what you have heard and seen me do, the lessons you have learned and the traditions you have received from me*” (4:9).

The issue, therefore, of social ethics, of wealth, poverty, the world economic system etc., or of the overall Christian social ethos, can only be dealt with by a careful examination of the biblical data, and the religious institutions developed in Jewish/Christian history (*e.g.* the *Jubilee* in the O.T. and the *Collection* of the Pauline communities in the N.T.), or of the development of norms, like the individual private property.

A. My personal academic career started with a critical examination of the earlier strata of the Synoptic tradition, with the so-called *Logia Source* (or the *Q-Document*), the source, which is generally believed to be closer to the *ipsissima vox* of the Historical Jesus. This second source of the Synoptic tradition, now lost, seems to expound a radically different theological view from the mainstream kerygmatic expression of the early Church, mainly produced by St. Paul’s *theologia crucis*, and followed by all canonical Gospel tradition. Most scholars now believe that the wisdom sayings in Q, on strictly literary grounds, cannot be secondary to the apocalyptic ones, since they were all formed without the slightest interest in, or knowledge of, the theme of judgment. Even more significant was our scientific conclusion,

---

\* [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petros\\_Vassiliadis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petros_Vassiliadis)

<sup>1</sup> The full text is available at: <https://www.goarch.org/social-ethos>.

that almost all prophetic and apocalyptic material either presuppose, or clearly incorporated in, the wisdom sayings, which clearly remind us of the Christian social ethos.<sup>2</sup>

B. I then moved to the soteriological interpretation of **Jesus' death on the Cross**,<sup>3</sup> and in particular St. Paul's *theologia crucis*, the heart of his dogmatic theology, a theology that later in the medieval era was responsible for the development and wider application of the *extra nos-pro nobis, via gratiae Christi* salvation of humankind. I tried in that research to underline, with a historical-critical and sociological analysis, the hidden sociological implications of this Pauline theology.

C. My third major academic research project was a misused and highly misinterpreted early Christian institution: the Pauline *Collection*.<sup>4</sup> This project, which Paul, after the decisions of the Apostolic Council, initiated among the Gentile communities in order to assist the Jerusalem community, was quite overlooked by the author of the Acts of the Apostles, despite the fact that it is well attested and theologically articulated in his major epistles as the most representative side of his praxis.

The importance of the *Collection* was not revived out of a proper scholarship academic interest; it was the result of the theological deliberations within the ecumenical movement. It was Oscar Cullmann who brought the significance of the Collection to the attention of the academic community. In his *Message to Catholics and Protestants*,<sup>5</sup> in a time of ecumenical euphoria, Cullmann tried to establish a common collection between Catholics and Protestants<sup>6</sup> as a symbolic action of solidarity and fellowship among people, who though not in eucharistic communion among themselves nevertheless confess the same name of Christ.

Cullmann, in fact, marked the beginning of a new era in biblical research on the subject, as the number of important monographs and other shorter contributions that came out in the 1960s indicates.<sup>7</sup> And my detailed exegetical monograph, *ΧΑΡΙΣ-ΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΑ-ΔΙΑΚΟΝΙΑ* appeared in 1985.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> *Η περί της Πηγής των Λογίων Θεωρία. Κριτική Θεώρησης των Σύγχρονων Φιλολογικών και Θεολογικών Προβλημάτων της Πηγής των Λογίων (The Q-Document Hypothesis. A Critical Examination of the Contemporary Literary and Theological Problems of the Sayings Source)*, Athens 1977; *LOGOI IESOU. Studies in Q*, Atlanta 1999; *Τα Λόγια του Ιησού. Το αρχαιότερο ευαγγέλιο (The Logia of Jesus. The most Ancient Gospel)*, Athens 2005. Also my "Pauline Theology, the Origins of Christianity and the Challenge of Q. A Personal Journey," in L. Padovese (ed.), *Atti del V Simposio Di Tarso Su S. Paolo Apostolo*, Rome 1998, 39-60.

<sup>3</sup> *Σταυρός και Σωτηρία. Το Σωτηριολογικό Υπόβαθρο της Παύλειας Διδασκαλίας του Σταυρού υπό το Πρίσμα της Προ-παύλειας Ερμηνείας του Θανάτου του Ιησού (Cross and Salvation. The Soteriological Background of the Pauline Teaching on the Cross under the Prism of the Pre-Pauline Interpretation of the Death of Christ)*, Thessaloniki 1983. Also, my "Beyond *Theologia Crucis*: Jesus of Nazareth from Q to John via Paul (or John as a Radical Reinterpretation of Jesus of Nazareth)," *GOTR* 47 (2002) 139-163.

<sup>4</sup> *ΧΑΡΙΣ-ΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΑ-ΔΙΑΚΟΝΙΑ. Ο κοινωνικός χαρακτήρας του παύλειου προγράμματος της λογείας (Charis-Koinonia-Diakonia. The Social Character of the Pauline Collection Project)*, Thessaloniki 1985.

<sup>5</sup> Eng. transl. by J. A. Burgess, Grand Rapids, Michigan 1959; cf. also O. Cullmann, "Oekumenische Kollekte und Gütergemeinschaft," *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, 1966, pp. 600-604)

<sup>6</sup> Orthodoxy has not made at that time her presence sufficiently felt yet in the ecumenical circles.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. D. Georgi, *Die Geschichte der Kollekte des Paulus für Jerusalem*, Hamburg 1965, followed almost 30 years later by an enlarged English translation under the title *Remembering the Poor. The History of Paul's Collection for Jerusalem*, Nashville 1992; K. G. Nickle, *The Collection. A Study in Paul's Strategy*, London 1966, a dissertation conducted under Cullman's supervision, and submitted to the Faculty of Theology in University of Basel a year earlier.

<sup>8</sup> *ΧΑΡΙΣ-ΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΑ-ΔΙΑΚΟΝΙΑ* (see above n.4), published simultaneously with H-D. Betz's *2 Corinthians 8 and 9. A Commentary on two Administrative Letters of the Apostle Paul*, Philadelphia 1985, in the *Hermeneia* series. Also my "From the Pauline Collection to *Phos Hilaron* of Cappadocia," *SVTQ* 56 (2012) 5-16.

What stroked me was that almost all scientific treatments were limited to the ecclesiological, ecumenical and eschatological dimension of that pioneer institution of the early Christian community. Even today some scholars<sup>9</sup> deny the radical social dimension of the collection, and mostly see it as a tangible token in the early Christian community of the unity of the Church, presenting irrefutable evidence that God was calling the Gentiles to faith. Of course, none would deny that the collection was to some extent a sort of eschatological pilgrimage of the Gentile Christians to Jerusalem fostering the unity between Jewish and Gentile Christians. What was missing from the majority of scholarly works on the subject was an analysis of the remaining aspects of that unique phenomenon of ancient Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

The Pauline collection certainly had *ecumenical*, *ecclesiological* and *eschatological* characteristics. However, its main aim was a social one; at least this comes out of the theological argument Paul produced in 2 Corinthians. Unlike the Palestinian model – where a voluntary poverty was exercised and the material goods, property and possessions, were sold and the proceeds distributed among all (Acts 2:44ff.; 5:1ff) – Paul’s collection project aimed at sharing the surplus with the needy of society at large. In the end, the purpose of the collection was “equality” (*ὅπως γένηται ἰσότης*, 2 Cor 8:14). According to his argument in 2 Cor 8-9, the ultimate purpose of the collection project was the realization of the social ideal of the *equal distribution and permanent sharing of the material wealth*. That is why he concludes his main theological argument with a reference to the incident of the Israelites’ collection of manna in the wilderness, taken from Exodus 16:18 - “*He who gathered much had nothing left over, and he who gathered little had no lack*” (2 Cor 8:15). He was, therefore, one of the first in world literature who promoted the “economy of the enough”. Needless to point out that in today’s ecclesiastical practice, both Eastern and Western, this exalted concept of collection has degenerated into a much-neglected institution, one that lacks the social and ecumenical dimension Paul had given it.<sup>11</sup>

G. Theissen, one of the leading New Testament sociologists of our time, gives the following interpretation of the Pauline understanding of equality. He argues<sup>12</sup> that with Paul Christianity has developed a new type of social relations based on the equality of all. This was inconceivable for Roman society, particularly if we consider the limitations of the right of citizenship or the variations in legal penalties. However, in Paul (his argument goes on) this equality, though extended to all regardless of race, sex or religious background (Gal 3:28), was always internalized, since it was definitely understood within the context of “in Christ” (*ἐν Χριστῷ*).<sup>13</sup> In developing this new ethos, Paul demanded subordination, trust and reverence from the weaker strata of the society, and mutual respect, love and responsibility from the stronger ones. In this way, Paul preserved the inequalities of the society almost intact

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf. e.g., the more recent dissertation by D. J. Downs, *The Offering of the Gentiles. Paul’s Collection for Jerusalem in its Chronological, Cultural, and Cultic Contexts*, WUNT 248, Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Even scholars like N. A. Dahl, who focus on the social dimension of the Pauline theology (*Studies in Paul*, Augsburg Minneapolis 1977, “Paul: A Sketch,” pp. 1ff; “Paul and Possessions,” pp. 22ff; “On the Literary Integrity of 2 Corinthians 1-9,” pp. 38f), saw the Pauline Collection as a “meaningful expression of mutual solidarity”, which “symbolized for him the unity of Jew and Gentile within the church” (p. 6).

<sup>11</sup> Cf. my *XAPIΣ-KOINΩNIA-DIAKONIA*, pp. 186ff; also, my “Equality and Justice in Classical Antiquity and in Paul: The Social Implications of the Pauline Collection”, *SVTQ* 36 (1992) pp. 51-59.

<sup>12</sup> Mainly in his *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, Philadelphia 1979.

<sup>13</sup> Theissen gave this new ethos the name *Liebespatriarchalismus* (Love-patriarchalism), a term borrowed from Ernst Troeltsch.

and to some extent even legitimized them. Theissen, however, has not considered seriously the theological as well as the social implications of the Pauline collection project.<sup>14</sup>

The situation is quite similar with the **O.T. scholarship**. Only recently have we experienced a change in the exegetical analysis of the O.T. biblical data. Previously there was a tragic and ironic dichotomy in scholarly methodology. We either followed the prevailed spiritual interpretation of the divine economy through the Christological (mainly Pauline, but also Johannine) overtones, or we surrendered to a Marxist materialistic analysis.

It is true that the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, has several approaches to presenting God's alternative in terms of the political-economic-religious power systems of the peoples, depending on the historical context and the opportunities available: autonomous establishment of an alternative in the sense of the solidarity of tribal society; a prophetic criticism of injustice and the legal transformation of the situation on the basis of a vision of actual human life in community with the earth and all other created beings; even resistance in the case of totalitarian oppression.

From Jesus' later criticism of the temple (Mark 11:15ff par) it becomes clear that the sacrificial system introduced under King Solomon was a way of robbing the poor, and not just a means of facilitation, through the use of money. Biblical scholarship only quite recently has underlined that in the Bible the purpose of property – for some the real cause of neo-liberal capitalism – was meant to sustain human life in the community in close connection with the environment, whereas today it is solely oriented towards the production of monetary gain.

The same is true with the basic notion of liberation of the Hebrews from the slavery of the Egyptian empire (and later around 1250 BCE of the farmers from the tribute obligations of the Canaan city-kingdoms). The fact that the freed slaves had settled on the Palestinian mountains and organized their common affairs in egalitarian fashion, with explicit reference to their God, to whom they owed their liberation, slowly but steadily faded away and was internalized and spiritualized. This is more evident in the scholarly (and theological) analysis of Christian *freedom*. Of course, the language used in the O.T. to describe this event is primarily that of “redemption” rather than of “freedom.” Only in the description of *Jubilee*, the year of “freedom”, are we encountered with a real conception of freedom (Lev 25:10). This idea was theologically developed in Trito-Isaiah (Is 61:1), the passage on which Jesus of Nazareth has based his programmatic proclamation (Lk 4:16ff).

Coming now to the **Proto-Pauline** evidence<sup>15</sup> there was quite widespread the conviction, till very recently, that Paul, perhaps the main theologian of freedom, (starting from 1 Cor 7:22), only speaks of *internal* freedom.<sup>16</sup> The same is true for 1 Cor 8:1–11:1. Only in 1 Cor 10:29 are we encountered with a freedom that is specifically Christian, stemming of course from the Cynic background, but adding an *ecclesiological* dimension. In 2 Cor 3:17 *eleutheria* is equivalent to *parrhēsia* or freedom to speak forthrightly, and without a veil, for where the Spirit dwells there is freedom (*οὗ δὲ τὸ Πνεῦμα Κυρίου, ἐκεῖ ἐλευθερία*). The tragic observation in most modern scholarship is that in Paul freedom has to do with the conventional schema “freedom from law, sin, and death” taking their argument from the letter

---

<sup>14</sup> The same is true of E. Schussler-Fiorenza, who nevertheless admits that in 2 Cor 8:13ff we have an important reference to St. Paul's understanding of equality (*In Memory of Her*, New York 1983, p. 192). Neither Theissen nor Schüssler-Fiorenza – I limit myself to these two progressive contemporary theologians – proceeded into further and deeper examination of the social implications of the collection project.

<sup>15</sup> What follows is based on my contribution “St. Paul: Apostle of Freedom in Christ,” in Archbishop Demetrios of America - J. Chryssavgis (eds.), *In the Footsteps of Saint Paul. An Academic Symposium. Papers Presented at the Pauline Symposium October 11-16, 2008*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press: Brookline, Massachusetts 2011, 153-167.

<sup>16</sup> Of course, parallel to the Pauline statement: “Christ is the liberator of Christians” (*Χριστός ἡμᾶς ἠλευθέρωσεν*), there are numerous similar assertions by Cynics with regard to Diogenes, and by Epicureans with regard to Epicurus.

to the Galatians and the epitome of the Pauline thought, his letter to the Romans, where most of the argument for an internalized understanding of freedom by Paul is based upon (Rom 6:18ff). The issue at stake here is the alleged *de-radicalization* by Paul of the *kerygma* of Jesus of Nazareth. The question frequently asked is: what happened and in less than a generation after Jesus' death on the cross his programmatic proclamation (Luke 4:1ff) of a new messianic era, which would also entail liberation according to the Prophets (Is 61:1ff etc), disappeared or at least became marginal?

Many scholars in our days have accused Paul either for an unrestricted obedience to civil authorities (Rom 13), or for surrendering the divine gift of freedom and human dignity, even accepting the status of slavery (1 Cor 7:21; Phlm), or for implying the subordination of women (1 Cor 14:34ff.; Eph 5:22; Col 3:18; etc.). I am referring to the well-known household codes (*Haustafeln*, Col 3:18ff. and parallels). It was mainly these cases that gave rise to the criticism that Paul did not resist with all his power to the socio-political *status quo*, and that he and his school, and Christianity thereafter, tolerated unjust social institutions and structures.

Without any question, the solution Paul offered to ancient society was not as radical and idealistic as the solution the Palestinian community experienced in their "common" or "no property" communal life (evidenced in the Synoptic tradition and Acts). Nevertheless, the "open fellowship" and the "common Eucharistic meals" St. Paul so vigorously defended, was in fact a *realistic solution* that can be characterized as a "social integration" of the Church (as an eschatological charismatic community and proleptic manifestation of the Kingdom of God) into a declining world. This realistic solution of Paul may not struggle to implement the social values of unconditional freedom, justice, equality, eradication of poverty, preservation of the integrity of creation etc., at any cost. Rather it gave priority to the reality of the Kingdom of God and its smooth and gentle integration within the present social order. In other words, Paul's emphasis was not upon social *transformation* as such, but upon the *formation* of an ecclesial (eucharistic) reality that inevitably would become the decisive element in creating a new social reality of freedom, justice and equality.

This general trend in biblical scholarship is the result of modernity and the ensuing historico-critical paradigm. Looking at the ambivalence of modernity, some theologians (Ulrich Duchrow and others) insist that there must be a criterion to judge what should be saved and what should be overcome from the great achievements of the Enlightenment. For, there is no doubt that modernity, from a midwife of human rights, with the influx of neo-liberal capitalism changed the power balance and became their murderer. On the basis of ages-old principles of modernity, the present world economic system is increasingly falling back into totalitarian trends. Only if we follow the line of the authentic biblical liberation theology, can we accept and use the positive values of the present day "modern paradigm".

Nevertheless, it is not only the deficiencies of modernity that has led and facilitated Christianity to relegate its concern for burning social issues, like the eradication of poverty, the prophetic stance on greed and wealth, and the preservation of the integrity of God's creation, from the centre to the periphery of its mission. The entire history of the Church, although has followed an incredible and unimaginable path that gave her the opportunity to conquer the educated world, and give hope to the grass root people, unconsciously resulted in making this biblical, ecclesiological, and missiological analysis we have described above not an imperative, but an option. The prevailed soteriological interpretation of the "Christ event" by Paul, and the profound mystical analysis of the human sin of the Johannine interpretation, at the expense of the radicality of Jesus' message at the very early stages, and later on the eventual win of the neo-platonic Alexandrian thought over the more historically balanced Antiochian analysis of the divine economy, made the divine, spiritual, esoteric etc., theology (from above?) the norm; and the human, social, economic etc., theology (from below?) the exception. And all these, despite the balanced Chalcedonian Christological formula, despite the enormous social contribution of enlightened personalities (like St. Basil and many others

from the past) and hosts of others from the more recent Christian history, as well as collective initiatives of our days.

With what I have very briefly stated so far, I do not have the ambition to offer a solution to the problem that lies at the heart of our discussion. Much more professional in the field, have offered uncontested arguments for a new understanding and stance of our current world economic system. All I wanted to underline was that the “way is narrow” and the path difficult. Small steps have been successfully taken. At a small-scale traditional Churches, like the Orthodox, have started looking carefully at the problem.<sup>17</sup> At a much larger scale the recently drafted *New Mission Statement*, though not without difficulties (in view of the wider constituency that is aiming at, *i.e.* Evangelicals, Catholics, Pentecostals, in addition of the registered WCC member-Churches), sufficiently addressed the problem. But still a lot of work needs to be done.

And to use Gramsci’s theory on the need for a worldwide hegemony, unless the biblical academic community proceeds to a “paradigm shift”, a new methodological approach to the Bible, and our Churches and Christian agencies move to a holistic (spiritual and material) emphasis on our future witness to the Gospel, our vision for eco-justice will be lost in the variety of mission priorities; it will remain an *option*, and never become an *imperative*. Even after the recent threat of a nuclear and an ecological disaster.

---

<sup>17</sup> One of the recent issues of the *Bulletin of Biblical Studies*, the only Orthodox scholarly periodical on the Bible, was devoted to “The Bible and World Economy”, the official journal of the Church of Greece, *Theologia*, has decided to also devote a whole issue on “Theology and Economy” etc..