

THE CONCEPT OF JUSTICE ACCORDING TO SAINT GREGORY PALAMAS*

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This paper seeks to elucidate the way in which the principle of justice/righteousness functions in the thought of St Gregory Palamas. As the paper notes, the concept of 'justice' or 'righteousness'—the biblical equivalent of justice—was a central concern to both the ethical systems of the Ancient Greeks and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Following in the wake of these ancient currents, St Gregory regards righteousness/justice as being inextricably connected to divine economy and the human endeavour to respond to the grace it imparts. As such, the 'justice' of Palamas is rather different from retributive and punitive forms of justice and the modern associations therewith. Though justice/righteousness is ultimately a response to the divine call to deification, it is not, in St Gregory's view, indifferent to the realities of social justice.

The concept of justice occupies a central position in human thought and life. For a clearer understanding of this concept, and for a more complete presentation of the particular content it assumed in Christian and Patristic literature, it is necessary to contrast it with the pre-Christian, biblical tradition, and even more so with its significance outside the Bible. In the literature of Ancient Greece, justice was already associated with the notion of virtue, which was taken as the main characteristic of a just man.¹ According to Plato, justice harmonizes the virtues of the tri-partite human soul, while Aristotle considers it to be the sum total of moral virtues. In the Old Testament, righteousness is of great theological significance. The pre-eminent Righteous One is God. People become righteous by aligning their will with that of God and observing his law. We demonstrate our faithfulness to God and his testament through works of the law. However, if the works of the law are interpreted on an individual basis and are practiced independently of any trust in divine righteousness, this undermines communion with God and has a negative effect on relations with our neighbour. In the biblical tradition, God's righteousness is linked to his mercy. The long-awaited Messiah will 'execute justice and righteousness in the land' and in his days, Israel will be saved.² The fullest testimony to this is the incar-

* Translated from Greek by James W. Lillie.

¹ See Theognis, *The Elegiac Poems of Theognis* 1.147–8 (LCL 258).

² Jer 23:5–6.

nation and ministry of Christ. In his comments on the verse in the Psalms, 'the Lord is merciful and righteous',³ Basil the Great succinctly observes that 'Scripture always links God's mercies with righteousness, teaching us that God's mercy is not unjust nor is his judgement unmerciful'.⁴

Christ himself calls those who 'hunger and thirst after righteousness' blessed.⁵ Naturally, perfect righteousness cannot be achieved by mankind, either as a universal or individual virtue. However, the desire for righteousness, the hunger and thirst for it, which, in final analysis, is the desire and fervent quest for the righteous God, makes us blessed and prepares us for the complete satisfaction of our longing. The Lord is 'a place embracing the righteous', and the righteous who receive the Lord within themselves become 'a place for the Lord'.⁶ Righteous people are humble, 'never boasting of themselves'. This is why they receive within themselves the grace of God, which is revealed in the world through Christ.⁷ The revelation of divine righteousness rectifies the injustice wrought by people through their failure to follow God's will by not rendering to him his due. Saint Gregory Palamas points out that none of God's work is without righteousness, and no work of God involves injustice. This can also be seen in the task of the salvation of the world. The whole history of the divine dispensation is performed with righteousness. God was not unjust even in his treatment of the devil.

The characteristic feature of God's righteousness is that it is not imposed through force, as is the case with tyrannical authority. Thus, the power of God in the task of our salvation does not precede righteousness, but follows it. This, St Gregory says, is the most excellent order which God observes in the performance of his work. People are invited to be taught this in practice during their mortal life, so that they may also retain it steadfastly when they are in the realm of immortality, when they will obtain power.⁸ God's righteousness is not applied as punishment towards the unrighteous, but as the therapeutic grace of his love, which vindicates us and prepares us for our eternal edification. This righteousness appears to come into conflict with righteousness in the sense of distributive or legal justice. It is presented as an act of leniency and, from that point of view, is unjust. This is why Saint Isaac the Syrian says: 'Do not call God just, because his justice is not recognized in your affairs'.⁹

However, this is precisely where the essential difference between divine righteousness and human justice lies. It does not return wickedness for wickedness, which compounds the evil and extends its presence in the world, nor does it treat

³ Ps 114:5.

⁴ Basil the Great, *Homilia in psalmum* 114.3 (PG 30:489A).

⁵ See Matt 5:6.

⁶ Basil the Great, *Homilia in psalmum* 32.1 (PG 30:324D). Cf. Ps 32:1.

⁷ See 1 Cor 1:39; Cf. Gregory Palamas, *Homily* 2.3, in *Saint Gregory Palamas: The Homilies*, ed. Christopher Veniamin, 2nd ed. (Dalton, PA: Mount Thabor Publishing, 2014).

⁸ See Gregory Palamas, *Homily* 16.2.

⁹ Isaac the Syrian, *Λόγος* 60, in *Τοῦ ὁσίου Ἰσαὰκ τοῦ Σύρου. Τὰ εὐρεθέντα ἀσκητικά* (I. Σπετσιέρη: Ἀθῆναι, 1895), 215.

wickedness as though it had never occurred, which would do away with righteousness altogether. In contrast to human justice, though, which condemns the unrighteous while not addressing the injustice, God's righteousness addresses the injustice while exonerating the unrighteous person, God suffering the injustice himself.¹⁰ In this way, God's righteousness comes across as an extremely positive and therapeutic action which limits the spread of evil.

Christ restores righteousness in a twofold manner. He vindicates God before mankind, because he was sacrificed for us out of boundless love; but he also vindicates man before God by submitting entirely, as a human person, to God the Father.¹¹ In this way, God's righteousness remains untroubled and eventually vindicates the sinful person. Christ, who at his baptism fulfilled 'all righteousness', opened the heavens to us, says Saint Gregory Palamas.¹² Furthermore, as the Sun of Righteousness, he also shines upon us and opens our eyes to the path to deification. Just as the visible sun, with its dawning, creates the time for bodily work, by the same token the Sun of Righteousness provides us, through his manifestation, with the time for spiritual work. Whereas bodily work, which is carried out in the light of the visible sun, is interrupted at sundown, and people work 'until the evening',¹³ the unwaning light of the Sun of Righteousness provides us with the opportunity for uninterrupted spiritual work.¹⁴

The preeminent task of man is spiritual work. It is this work which establishes us as being created 'in the image and likeness' of God. In his epistolary composition, *To the Reverend Nun Xenia*, the aforementioned passage from the Psalms is elevated by Saint Gregory Palamas to the spiritual level and is linked to another passage in the New Testament: 'until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts'.¹⁵ He writes: 'When the day dawns and the morning star rises in our hearts, according to the chief among the Apostles, then, in the same way, according to the prophetic saying "the true man will go out to his true work", ascending in the light the road that leads to the eternal mountains. In this light—what a miracle—he surveys things beyond this world'.¹⁶

Man's vindication in Christ opens up to us boundless horizons and limitless prospects along vertical and horizontal dimensions, inviting us, at the same time, to make an appropriate response. This response becomes effective when it proceeds,

¹⁰ See Rom 5:6 ff.

¹¹ See Archimandrite Zacharias Zacharou, *Αναφορά στη θεολογία του Γέροντος Σωφρονίου* (Εσσεξ: Άγγλίας, 2000), 59.

¹² *Homily* 60.9.

¹³ See Ps 103:23.

¹⁴ See Gregory Palamas, *Homily* 49.2

¹⁵ 2 Pet 1:19.

¹⁶ Gregory Palamas, *To the Most Reverend Nun Xenia* 59, in *The Philokalia*, ed. and trans. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, vol. 4 (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1995), 317. *Πρὸς Ἰωάννην καὶ Θεόδωρον τοὺς φιλοσόφους* 18, in *Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμά, Συγγράμματα*, ἔκδ. Π. Χρήστου, τόμος 5 (Θεσσαλονίκη, 1992), 224.

not from the psychological level, but from our deeper being, whence it pours out in two directions: towards God and towards our neighbours who are 'in the image of God'.

Our being desires righteousness and seeks the divine privileges that were given to us as part of our nature. Testimony to this are the enduring struggles and endless efforts of people for equality and justice. As long as these struggles and efforts are motivated by a worldly perspective and are directed by egocentrism and impassioned self-love, they deteriorate and eventually have the opposite results. Our natural desire is changed and this often results in unnatural animus. Ignoring God's due, that is his commandments, is a slight to his eternal vindication. Claiming individual rights which express egocentric self-love undermines the universal rights which are sought by our deeper being, our existence 'in the image and likeness' of God.

The justice which Christians are called upon to exercise presupposes the complete renewal of the intellect and the whole of their being. People who are estranged from God are invited to repent, to clothe themselves in and to activate 'the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness'.¹⁷ In place of the old Adam, who committed 'the ultimate injustice', there comes the new Adam, 'the noetic Sun of Righteousness',¹⁸ the Father 'of the future age and founder of eternal life'.¹⁹ On this new basis, justice takes on an eschatological perspective, in the sense that its implementation is not restricted to the realm of history, but extends into eternity. More accurately, this justice is inspired from the level of eternity and is experienced in history with the light of eternity, and the practice of this eschatological justice is our primary aim. This is our task as the creation made in the image of God and it is realized when 'the day dawns and the morning star rises', namely the Sun of Righteousness.

Christians are not called upon to cultivate some sort of legal justice, as the Israelites did. Saint Gregory notes that Christ said: 'Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven'.²⁰ Christ's righteousness, which is the sum total of his virtues, is encapsulated in love. This love is expressed as a humble response to the love which God had shown him: 'for he first loved us'.²¹ In the end, our justice is identifiable with our gratitude to God, the Giver of good, because all the virtues are divine gifts, which only become ours when we attribute them to God, in gratitude.²² Furthermore, the 'excess' of our justice cannot be other than an 'excess' of our gratitude.

¹⁷ Eph 4:24; Gregory Palamas, *Πρὸς Ἰωάννην καὶ Θεόδωρον τοὺς φιλοσόφους* 18, 224.

¹⁸ Taken from the Troparion of Christmas Eve.

¹⁹ See Gregory Palamas, *Homily* 54.10.

²⁰ Gregory Palamas, *Homily* 54.4; cf. Matt 5:20.

²¹ 1 John 4:20.

²² See Maximos the Confessor, *Κεφάλαια θεολογικά* 5.29 (PG 90:1272B–C). Cf. Gregory Palamas, *Πρὸς Ἀθανάσιον Κυζίκου* 27, in *Γρηγορίου τοῦ Παλαμά, Συγγράμματα*, ἔκδ. Π. Χρήστου, τόμος 2 (Θεσσαλονίκη, 1966), 438.

The hesychast spirit of Saint Gregory does not overlook the importance of social justice. Indeed, on the contrary, it highlights it with its radical biblical character. Indicative of this is the way he understands the anti-social nature of the behaviour of the two rich men in Christ's parables. One of these was the rich man whose fields were so productive that he thought he would raze his storehouses and build bigger ones, to take in the whole of his harvest;²³ the other was the man who wore rich clothing and lived in luxury, but was indifferent to the poverty of Lazarus.²⁴ Neither of them was condemned for committing a transgression, but because, despite all the things they had acquired, they did not help others.

Any time the faithful hang on to things they no longer need, this constitutes an injustice to others who need them and do not have them. It demonstrates a blatant lack of sympathy and that our love for things is greater than that which we have for other people. The 'surplus' belonging to the faithful should supply the 'wants' of the poor. According to Saint Gregory Palamas, this surplus is the 'mammon of injustice', which should be deposited in the communion of love;²⁵ 'for the treasures of the common coffers of God's possessions are common to all'.²⁶

There is, of course, an even graver injustice which is committed by the rich and powerful through their exploitation and depredation of the poor and weak. In this case, we have greed, the 'second idolatry', which is the root of all evils.²⁷ The hesychast theologian and Archbishop of Thessaloniki castigated the prevailing social injustice, and, in fact, attributed to it the disturbance and turmoil of his time, although he also considered that external dangers and challenges played a part.²⁸

These radical social views, which also inform Saint Gregory's critique of social life,²⁹ are founded in his evangelical theocentrism. Justice, as a universal virtue of people made 'in the image and likeness' of God, calls upon us to form a godly ethic. It invites us to attribute to God his due measure, and when we do so, we attribute everything, since we have nothing and everything belongs to God. It is precisely then, that everything is granted to us, and we become gods in all things 'without identity of essence'.³⁰

Within this perspective, human justice becomes unlimited as regards its content. It becomes righteousness, which justifies the work of God, a reflection of divine righteousness which vindicates this world of injustice.³¹ The demand for justice, which is always linked to love, binds the faithful in their relationship not only with the world and with God, but also with themselves. The just behaviour of Christians is

²³ See Luke 12:16 ff.

²⁴ See Luke 16:19 ff.

²⁵ See Gregory Palamas, *Homily* 48.5; Cf. Luke 16:9.

²⁶ Gregory Palamas, *Homily* 13.8.

²⁷ See Col 3:5; Gregory Palamas, *Homily* 39.6.

²⁸ See, e.g. Gregory Palamas, *Homily* 63.11–12.

²⁹ See, e.g. Gregory Palamas, *Homily* 63.11.

³⁰ Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum* 41 (PG 91:1308B).

³¹ See Rom 1:17.

expressed not only through their fair and charitable dealings with others or through gratitude to God, but also through their dutiful response to the invitation of God, who offers them the gift of glorification.

When people make no effort to respond to this invitation, they become recipients of things which do not belong to them. They show themselves to be ungrateful. This ingratitude is not only unjust towards God, but also to themselves. Through their behaviour, they cancel out God's work of renewal as regards themselves. This is because the 'locus' where God's work of renewal is confirmed in the world is the human person. In the person of Christ, God's righteousness towards the world is revealed. In the person of a believer, divine justice within the world is effected.

Finally, it is clear that our unjust behaviour towards God and ourselves has cosmic dimensions. Our task as people is not merely our personal perfection through purification from the passions and everyday wickedness,³² but in drawing in and offering the whole of creation. This is how the image of God within us is completed and vouchsafed: when our intellect, as Saint Gregory Palamas says, 'brings every created thing closer to God, for it now participates in all things and even in Him who is above all things, since it has faithfully conformed to the [divine] image'.³³

The injustice now being committed, centred on the human person with social and ecological dimensions, has global repercussions and enduring consequences for the future and the generations to come. The care for the environment, restriction of social and ecological pollution, and destruction on the part of each and every person likewise has global repercussions and enduring consequences. It is care which reins in the injustice being practiced. In this way, people, with God, become fellow custodians and fellow creators of the world. We do not create anything from nothing, as God does. However, as a creation 'in the image and likeness' of God, we take part in the creation of the world through the personal image each one of us creates for ourself and for the world. The perfection of human justice coincides with the manner in which we manage to conform to the image of God in our life.

³² See Matt 6:34.

³³ See Gregory Palamas, *To the Reverend Nun Xenia* 59.