

HOW POVERTY AFFECTS RELIGIOSITY – ASPECTS FROM THE GREEK DEBT CRISIS

By

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Abstract

In this paper I argue for social ethics of poverty from a sociological and theological perspective: how poverty as a social and economic situation is disproportionate to the wealth that an organized society has referred to contemporary examples and how religiosity is actually affected by these standards. Poverty, as a status of limited economic and social activity, existed from the very moment the first human society was formed. By the time that wealth emerged as a crucial historical subject and as a key differentiating factor between the people, it has been consolidated in the consciousness and the collective unconscious of mankind, as well as the class stratification of society, together with contradictions and an ontological dimension of this differentiation. On the basis of the above, I will also refer to the differences between the social class hatred which triggers tensions, social anomalies and conflicts and in addition, solidarity, class cooperation and inevitability of the reciprocity of social dependencies, values that the Christian teaching, the Fathers of the Church such as St. John Chrysostom and St. Maximus the Confessor, and at last the very act of our Church, have highlighted, over the centuries. Furthermore, I will try to answer if there are any spiritual prerequisites for social peace, unity and prosperity in today's globalized world. Can there be a substantial transformation, a spiritual "Metamorphosis" of societies in this direction? And at last, is money itself evil or is its usage that defines whether it's bad or good?

About religiosity

Religion as a historical dimension, as experience and institution, is in turn a social phenomenon, as all social systems, whether developed or not, are not aimed at the spirituality of the inner human but in social reality. Any alteration of the process of religiosity, may alter both the message and the purposes of any Religion. What we can safely say is that religiosity is a dynamic process, an integral part of all societies. This process though cannot be confused with Religion/-s or Religionism. Religiosity can define all the above and seems to have an independent process through history. So, religiosity could be the social dynamics that develops inner and outer mechanisms of seeking the Divine, by activating the necessary reflexes of every human being so that he/she is inspired positively by this perspective.

How we can define poverty

Something very common that we can currently retrieve from financial analysts and sociological and political science papers, is that poverty as a social and economic situation is disproportionate to the wealth that an organized society has. The world's richest 1% get 82% of the wealth, says Oxfam" (*bbc.com*, last retrieved 6/9/2018).

Poverty, as a status of limited economic and social activity, existed from the very moment the first human society was formed. By the time that wealth emerged as a crucial historical subject and as a key differentiating factor between the people, it has been consolidated in the consciousness and the collective unconscious of mankind, as well as the class stratification of society, together with contradictions and an ontological dimension of this differentiation.

Keynes describes the phenomenon of poverty as a paradox, especially when it manifests itself in times of economic growth and abundance, attributing it to the inadequacy of active demand (Keynes, 1936). Indeed, he points out that the richer a society is, the greater the gap between actual and potential production and between workers with certain margins of consumption and the unemployed, who are condemned to under-consumption and poverty. Sources of poverty are not just unemployment that is infinitely expanding—especially in times of crisis— but also temporary employment conceiving explosive dimensions (Vergopoulos, 2008).

People who are on the verge of poverty or live within these given conditions usually come to realize the unfavorable situation they found themselves in, due to the static and the relentless fiber of the individual problems that poverty creates and reproduces. As Bauman observes: "*Poverty is a social and mental state (...) when "you are poor", it means that you are blocked from what is perceived as "normal life"*" (Bauman, 1998). Poverty, especially at a time of general capitalist crisis and massive destruction of capital, has an ontological dimension, as it develops a latent and distorted social and economic consciousness.

As a result, poverty, over time and especially in Capitalism, given the economic and social structures of the system, is a situation inherent in social exclusion. Paul Lafarge, K. Marx's son in law, in his book *<The religion of capital>* refers to the social and economic isolation that a man encounters because of poverty and unemployment, through an ironic and yet tragic acting play: "*- In which way your God (The Capital) punishes you? – He condemns me with unemployment. In this way they anathematize me. Meat, wine and fire are prohibited for me. They condemn me, my wife and children dying from hunger*" (Lafarge, 1887).

How religiosity is actually affected by these given standards?

Nowadays, the world seems to be in turmoil: the war in Syria, the rise of nationalism in response to the imposed economic federalism of the EU, with the economic crisis not actually being overcome, but spreading through restrictive **austerity** policy. Capitalism is globalized, with its positive and negative aspects: along with quick and via internet transactions, comes i.e. child labor. Poverty isn't something that only Third World countries experience.

So, if poverty can affect religiosity itself or its quality, then specific elements of the political and economic spectrum can have a good, bad or the worst effect on people's attempts to access the Divine.

Obviously, what is not globalized is a vision, something that will inspire people and drive them to what the Church refers to as "the King's road," to an actual ethical, truly humane standard. Here we can find main differences between the Word of Church, which lies mainly on what Jesus Christ mentioned: "*Whoever comes with me, I will never cast out*" (Mark. 7, 34). Whoever and **not** whatsoever, so that everyone is obliged to follow His Word. Following is optional, not enforced.

Globalization, on the other hand, along with consumerist ethics ("*you exist as a person, as an individual as long as you can consume*") is compulsive. Either you (can) choose to be a part of this or you have to be against it. This actually determines the very meaning of what Globalization is. It will be crucial to quote what the Patriarchs and Archbishops of Ecumenical Orthodoxy mention about this subject: "*Our Church has a big responsibility in order to fight hunger and every form of human need amongst the World. This phenomenon lays on a period of time that most of world's countries live under an established globalized financial regime, which causes a crucial cultural identity crisis, because hunger, not only threatens human lives, but offends the greatness and the sanctity of human creation and at last God Himself*" (Final decisions of the Holy Synod of the Ecumenical Orthodoxy, 2016).

As I've already mentioned about religiosity and religion as much, they are connected and they can actually be two different things. We can also understand that religiosity can be affected by a range of social manifestations. Poverty especially affects not only the given economic situation of an individual, but the inner man as well. It affects his soul, the way he sees and approaches and interacts with other people. Given the fact that public space expands when people know, value and respect its existence, poverty can be a shrinking factor of it.

On the basis of the above, there may be differences between the social class hatred which triggers tensions, social anomalies, conflicts and solidarity, class cooperation and the dynamics of social dependencies, values and facts that the Christian teaching, the Fathers of Church serve over the centuries.

Poverty and Church

Poverty cannot be seen from only one side and this is what the Christian Church is teaching. Poverty can be the chance for expressing solidarity and compassion. So, the power is not only determined by those who are willing to give, but also to those who get. The mechanism of capitalist accumulation and the general conditions for the development of capitalist production created an imbalanced ratio between the offer and the demand of labor power, reproducing and sustaining social pathogens such as poverty and malnutrition.

The current form of Capitalism seems to be determined on the occasion that the crisis forcibly ends the illusions of consumerist needs, redefining everyone's basic material needs directly.

What is also interesting is that just years before the 2008 crisis burst (2006), financial gurus were pointing that in the years to come poverty will rise and

that could be a problem because poverty as a situation affects people's judgment to such an extent that it would be desirable to even deprive them of their right to vote.

The poor as an existence is not treated anymore as part of society, but as part of a wider set that could support him in his difficult situation and help him to overcome it. *"Nowadays, someone who is considered poor, is not a rich man with just less money, but one 'different kind of man', is the personification of all 'public evil' (...) eliminated by the given 'moral' values of a society"* (Bauman, 1998). Not having the ability to consume, the poor become something like a "moral harassment" for the fraudulent bourgeois world.

This attempt to shift responsibilities from those who are actually to blame to those who are permanent, scientifically sickly and technically marginalized is—I believe—the cornerstone of modern mass Psychology, which is fully integrated within the context of the superstitious idealization of wealth and those who are profoundly enjoying it. As Berdyaev observes, *"the economic world of stock exchanges and banks, in fact, creates a clandestine world more of a mystical world, because indeed there is a mysticism of money that is not divine, not natural, but devilish and just as such, it governs the world"* (Berdyaev, 1946). I will talk about money and whether it is evil or not later.

Christian teaching moves within Jesus' prompting *"to love each other"*, as opposed to the Old Testament laws that justify violence, actually limiting the cycle of love only to those who were "blessed" with the Jewish identity. This can be another main differentiating factor between Christianity and ideology. Ideologies are creations, inspirations of the human mind. Just because of this fact, ideologies simply have an expiring date; they die sooner or later. And demise due to the necessity law of History; they become outdated and at last obsolete. Ideologies at last are made to serve the man, societies and give temporary solutions.

A dangerous fact—and in my humble opinion, can lead to social and religious heresy—is when religion seems to be a part of an ideological-political pattern. This happens when religion is alienated or downgraded and totally naked from its original signifier.

Greek Orthodox Fathers urge us to contrast the Christian teaching with any ideology that produces and reproduces hate and blind intolerance. Those who are actually reborn in Spirit and regenerated through the spiritual baptism of the Church, acquire something beyond chauvinism, social classes and ideologies. The Saints of Church also propose class collaboration that leads to class mobility rather than class struggle or conflict.

Under these circumstances, Neoliberalism and the politico - economic doctrines this kind of ideology produces impose a kind of heresy for Orthodox economic policy. Not like what S. Huntington says about Orthodoxy—that it's actually a heresy of Bolshevism (Huntington, 1996)—but in ethical, social and even economic terms.

Poverty cannot be seen from only one side and this is what the Church is teaching. Poverty can be the chance for expressing solidarity and compassion. So, the power is not determined by those who are willing to give, but also to

those who get. I will also mention, how in Greece, especially during the first years of the debt crisis, the Greek Orthodox Church made the slogan "*no one alone in the crisis*", actually happen, giving it a substantive, spiritual, more solid background and actual meaning.

Everything that narrows public space, thought and spirituality itself as a crucial social process, is inhumane. Ecumenical Orthodoxy, through its recent Holy Synod which took place during Summer of 2016 in Columbary (Crete) made clear that: "*Church cannot be indifferent with financial situations that have negative effects to all humanity*", adding that: "*(for our Church) viable economy is the one that combines effectiveness with justice and social solidarity*" (Final decisions of the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church, 2016). In the same Synod, Nationalism (but not healthy patriotism) is condemned as the main reason causing wars and conflicts between nations, a threat to peace, which is against God's will.

Under the pressure of the ruthless rhythms of the system that crush man and transform his very immediate needs into inaccessible luxuries, a tremendous mental endurance and vigor is required to remember the fact that Jesus blesses the poor without rewards to those who benefit from their situation ("*Blessed be ye the poor*": Luke 6, 20). The Kingdom of Heaven belongs to the "*fierce fighters*" of life, facing their difficulties, as challenges for spiritual greatness, imitating the profound and "*just*" (fair-minded) Job. In the Bible, the word "*poor*" receives religious content and becomes synonymous with the words *righteous* and committed to God or reserved for God (poor by world, but rich by God).

Facing the strain of pressure caused by the instant and thus a violent shortage of a man's basic needs, the poor resent and become more and more disappointed. Sometimes he expresses their disappointment with violent and aggressive ways. However, the eschatological theology of Christianity can help people to better understand the mediocrity of our world's harsh reality; it's characterized by states of permanent anxiety and sadness. Disobedient and oppressed in capitalist society poor workers, associated with fraudulent and formal freedom, must constantly struggle to improve their social situation, because this is their actual subjective interest, but also the objective truth.

There can be times that the poor, needy and oppressed, the "*damned*" of this world, is indulging in hate and vileness for the people who may be responsible for his situation, either it concerns with his close social or family environment, whether it has to do with the powerful and rich in general.

The financial determination and the utilitarian spirit of an inexorable Capitalism leaves little or no space for the development and consolidation of a climate of social peace and a level of understanding and cooperation between the classes. Teaching, tradition and the act of our Church—including soul healing, therapeutic and pastoral work, which attempt to inspire the leaders of this world, giving them intellectual enlightenment, the prospect for building a mild economic – social and political ambience, securing a certain level of social peace. In St. Basil the Great's Liturgy, we read that people should pray for their leaders "*deep and inalienable peace, which will ensure a peaceful and quiet life, with piety and*

modesty for all" (see *Ἡ Θεία Λειτουργία τοῦ ἐν Ἀγίοις Πατρός ἡμῶν Βασιλείου τοῦ Μεγάλου*. Cf. II Tim. 1-7).

The frustrated feeling of class hatred and the inelastic diffusion of the wrath of the unjust, can only have devastating effects for both the societies and the soul of the indignant. Christianity does not recognize the arrogance and the hatred that class struggle imposes. Christianity does not accept the denial of the human person or his image because this is the actual image of God, neither by the class nor by its representatives (Berdyayev, 1946).

There is a relentless psychological law —more so a fact— that sees the one who hates as "infected" by the actual object of his hatred. For Christianity, man is a unique psychosomatic entity, as a person who is not just something that came out of his sociopolitical environment.

The consumerist society, which is underpinned by the capitalist system, set out concrete and relentless criteria for the identification of an individual. The person is degraded —sometimes by his own will (!), sometimes in a violent way— to someone, where through his own consumer power, he eventually develops a distorted consciousness: A latent and pernicious view about a person or society as a consumer goods. Besides, it seems that in the post-modern society infested with consumerist ethics, there is no place for the poor.

The attitude of the Greek Orthodox Church can only be explained within the context of its theological approach over the wealthy and those who have power (financial – political etc.). In the case of the Greek debt crisis, which burst in 2010, Greek Orthodox Churches' public speech and preaching weren't limited or mainly characterized by anti-capitalist or anti-austerity aphorisms and anathemas.

Confirming its spiritual and social role the Church, as an institution, was the helper and supporter of the poor, the unemployed and those who were hit by the crisis and austerity measures, the refugees and the immigrants included. These people (refugees/immigrants) had a special misfortune to live in this very difficult period of time in Greece.

Every single local parish, especially those who are located in big cities in which problems that the crisis caused can be more harsh and violent, as dynamic social cells of our Church, have contributed most to the overall effort for multilateral support to those in need. The parish is part of the sanctified forms and structure of Orthodox communalism. An important work is also being done by the NGO of the Church of Greece, "Mission", a charity, non-profit association whose main goal is "*the instrument, the humble factor of the relief of the people*". NGO Mission, beyond everyday meals, spiritual and material support and immediate assistance to those in need, despite the difficulties the crisis occurred, has developed a range of diverse activities, the promotion of our ecclesiastical Tradition, etc.

A church cannot be confused with any charitable organization. Its main purpose is ecumenical salvation and internal peace. The church only uses its charitable actions to relieve the poor and to inspire political leadership. Church "*isn't a creation of this world, but it exists for the sake of this world*". Nevertheless, it would not be an exaggeration to say that in the years of the crisis, the Church in

Greece replaced the social state that was actually dissolved.

In Greece, especially during the first years of the debt crisis, the Greek Orthodox Church, made the slogan *"no one alone in the crisis"*, actually happen, giving it a substantive, spiritual, more solid background and actual meaning. The most important thing is that most of our fellow Greeks (Christian or not) got inspired and welcomed that stance, since this multilayered assistance was given unconditionally to all those in need, despite someone's religion, ethnicity or political beliefs.

There is not any specific list of beneficiaries of the charitable act of the Church (or at least it shouldn't exist). The church asks directly all people: *"What do you want me to do for you"* (Mark. 10, 51). One who can be benefited by the charitable act of the Church, is everyone, despite his/her ethnic, political, religious background. Christians now should act in the same way, expanding the Word of Church by their very actions, expressing solidarity and compassion. Besides, our Lord sets the basis of every charitable act, saying: *"This (charity) is something that you should do to commemorate me"* (Luke 22, 19).

Apostle Paul, in order to encourage and promote *"Logeia"*, a popular habit of collecting money or other goods for the less fortunate, will highlight: *"your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need"* (II Cor. 8, 13 – 14).

In Christian teaching, the value of human existence does not depend on its external traits, the economic power or weakness of every human being, but the common human substance that comes from the origin of the same Father. St. John Chrysostom, separates the material goods into free and non-free. Free are those which were given to man, through the creation of the world, to enjoy them without limitations and conditions. As non-free, are those which are acquired through work, that is, those who have conditions for possession and use, such as wealth, money or property.

J. Chrysostom sees this very fundamental cosmological arrangement as a measure of the wisdom of God, perfectly integrated into the eschatological teaching of the Church. Based on this observation Saint Gregory Palamas, proceeds further, expanding the communal freedom of free goods, to non-free ones, to those that acquired with personal contribution and work, since for their creation the raw materials (sun, water, air, etc.) belong again to God. These are his words: *"All goods that come from the treasury of God, they are common (accessible) to all people"* (Homily 14, MPG 151, 164 B).

With the above, we can see a distinction between Christian teaching and the "spirit of Capitalism" especially about property and material goods. The difference is fundamental and is mainly found in the fact that Christianity is the faith in Revelation rather than a metaphysical management logic of a historically given economic situation. Free goods were created by God or by His Grace and offered to people for good use in the context of interdependence: interdependence through the division of labor and the reciprocity of social dependencies.

Man should be considered as an administrator, a simple operator especially for the free –given by nature– goods and not an owner. In the *Psalms* we

read: "Lord owns the earth and it's everything, the universe and everyone that lives within it" (Ps. 23,1).

So, there are any spiritual prerequisites for social peace, unity and prosperity in today's globalized world. Can there be a substantial transformation, a spiritual "Metamorphosis", of societies in this direction?

World leaders consume too much of their power, make too much efforts, investing into financial "reform" plans, productivity reconstruction by social destructive measurements and no one seems to understand the need of an actual spiritual reconstruction of our societies, a real and solid vision that can be inspired by our Church's Word. Something that could have real "macro" results not only in Economy but –by all means– restoring humanity: a real "Metamorphosis".

Property and wealth

Money currencies, which are to a certain extent a cultural achievement and a social and economic conquest of mankind, facilitate trade by making them more direct since they act as general commercial equivalents.

The use of both money and property as a mean of enforcing and coercing, as a tool of repression of a social class over another surpasses their simple utilitarian and socially compatible qualities. The capitalist system hypocritically reaffirms the personal initiative on ownership to the means of production as well as in general (Berdyayev, 1946). St. John Chrysostom (*Homily in the I Corinthians*) will mention that "*our own interest is related to the interests of the others*".

Money is a mean of trading, a useful general commercial equivalent. The tendency to accumulation and over-accumulation is something different. However, money cannot be evil itself. Money doesn't value as itself rather from its usage as a means of exchange and payment. Therefore, it is morally neutral (Weber, 1922). Niall Ferguson also underlines that: "*Money is conventionally accepted as a means of trading that has the merit of eliminating the disadvantages of exchanging products*" (Ferguson, 2008).

Aristotle will notice that money is an intermediary, a regulatory instrument in trade, as an exchangeable substitute for the human trade needs (Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*). He is the first to deal in detail and in depth with the phenomena of Economic Science, formulating the theory of value. He separates the values of goods according to their usage and their exchange value.

He gives an exact definition of the term money (numismatics: νόμισμα) by referring to the Greek word νόμισμα (lit. coin but means money in general) pointing that this word is actually underlining the very meaning of its usage: "*We call it money (νόμισμα) because it's not a natural creation, but a creation of law and it's in our power to transform and change its usage and make it actually useless*" (Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea*).

Oswald Spengler will now say: "*Credit money, in the form of the English ratio between world trade and the export industry in a country without peasantry, serves as a basis to define capital, value, price, property, which are then applied without turning to other levels of culture and other life cycles*" (Spengler, 1918).

Weber, referring to the "anthroposophical", as he characterizes, Austrian writer Ferdinand Kurnberger's (1821-1879) perception of the accumulation of wealth, considers that simple savings and the efforts that an individual makes to save money, is a moral duty that partially forms a "peculiar morality" (Weber, 1905).

We cannot, however, demonize money and consequently, our daily transactions with it, seeking alternative methods such as the exchange of products, since this would be anachronistic, dangerous (i.e. cryptocurrencies) but also extremely difficult, especially now that societies are increasingly removed from traditional primary production methods.

It's money's usage that can be defined as evil, selfish etc. and not money whatever currency there is. During the last 8 years, due to the Eurozone crisis, political movements in many countries whose economies participate in the Federal Currency System, blamed Euro currency and its faulty architect for every single problem their countries dealt with (poverty rates rising, unemployment etc.).

Despite the fact that several positions of these movements are indeed solid, based on serious and real facts, blaming just a currency for any problem comes up isn't something that—at least for now— can give real solutions. Reality shows that misunderstandings, delays and misinformation could drive not many, but a specific, crucial set of people to become an easy audience to opportunist and populist leaders.

So, the multiple use of the money for selfish purposes, its "hoarding"—which goes beyond the tendency to secure certain limits on property— and the illusory shine of luxury, which is guaranteed by money, leads to a change of the natural balances, which God himself lied to this world as the foundation for its proper functioning. The Fathers of Church point out the enormous danger that this situation can cause to the people, while underlining the need for better management of wealth for the benefit of society.

St. Maximus the Confessor (*Chapters about love*), speaking about the "passive and the impassive" gaining of goods and wealth in general will mention that: "*all those who gain goods without any effort they don't feel sorry if they lose it. On the contrary they feel happy for something like that. But all those who gain goods with effort and pain, they feel sorry if they lose their ownings. In the Evangelion, the rich man left Jesus with sorrow. Either the ownership of good comes to be passive or impassive, it controls a man's life*".

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