

# THE LOVER OF MANKIND

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BYZANTINE THEOLOGY was historical theology, and as such it is of contemporary significance. In its long process of development and crystallization, religious thought in the medieval greek world became pregnant with the wisdom of the past and the solutions to the problems of the present and the future. Its study can engrave or draw a highway for the future of christianity and the ecumenical movement in particular.

In the present article we are concerned with a most profound concept of byzantine theology, the meaning and implications of the term *Theos Philanthropos*, and *philanthropia* as a property of God. Early christian theology seldom used either the noun *philanthropia* as a property of the Almighty or the adjective *philanthropos* as God's attribute. Primarily, after the first quarter of the third century, christianity, in its efforts to adapt itself in the graeco-roman world and to make itself meaningful and attractive to future converts, appropriated terms and ideas already meaningful to the cultural and intellectual environment. Thus, while *agape* dominates in early christian literature as the new commandment, after the epoch of Clement and Origen of Alexandria christian thought became impregnated with the greek words *philanthropia* and *philanthropos*.<sup>1</sup>

Clement of Alexandria was one of the most significant theologians who borrowed the term *philanthropia* in order to speak to pagans about God's love for man manifested through the incarnation of the Logos. Both God the Father and God the Logos are described as friends and lovers of man. Christ is the lover of man as both God and as man himself. His human *philanthropia* derives its inspiration from his personal experience as man who suffered and felt man's weaknesses and problems. He is Lord *Philanthropos* because he is the true associate of God's *philanthropia*.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless it was Origen who was most responsible for the growing use of *philanthropia* in medieval greek theological thought. Origen recapitulated what Theophilos of Antioch and Clement of

<sup>1</sup> For several ideas expressed in the present article I depend greatly on my book *Byzantine Philanthropy and Social Welfare* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1968), pp 29-41, 279-282.

<sup>2</sup> Clement of Alexandria, *Paedagogos*, I, viii, 5.

Alexandria had said before him. In contradiction to the views of Celsus, Origen writes that it was because of genuine *philanthropia* for man that the eternal Logos divested himself of his heavenly glory in order that he might be capable of being received by men. Not only is Christ *Logos Philanthropos* but his influence produces a complete transformation in the character of men who themselves become lovers of their fellows.

This revolutionary concept animated an enthusiasm for philanthropy and practical virtue in the byzantine Church which initiated a charitable movement and the erection of numerous philanthropic institutions. Because of the impact of the concept on the early christians, Ignatius bishop of Antioch had the courage to make a distinction between christians and non-christians. He wrote:

Take notice of those who have contrary opinions concerning Jesus Christ . . . how different they are . . . they do not care for acts of love, they have no care for the widow, the orphan, the distressed, the afflicted, the prisoner, or for him released from prison, neither do they worry about the hungry or the thirsty.<sup>1</sup>

In imitation of God's indiscriminate love for all humanity, *philanthropia* assumed an integrated and far-reaching meaning. The term was used to describe man's love for the totality of humanity, and its application was directed even to the humblest among men. It acquired the notion of selfless love and willing sacrifice, as the love of Christ for man was altruistic and sacrificial. The early christians were urged to embrace, in their love and concern, all those in need.<sup>2</sup> And indeed the care of the Church was not limited to christians alone but became universal in character.

In the byzantine era proper, the same religious thought permeated all strata of theological thinking. As God made no distinction because of his love for all, man's love was exercised toward all, transcending sex, race, and national boundaries. Fundamentally, all theologians, Church Fathers and ecclesiastical writers expressed the view that *philanthropia* is one of the paramount properties of God expressing itself in his relationship with man; and, therefore, man ought to possess the same attribute and to apply it for the benefit of his fellow man.

The theology of *philanthropia* was introduced into the liturgy

<sup>1</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, VI, 2.

<sup>2</sup> Cf The Shepherd of Hermas, *Mandate*, II, 2.

proper and into all other forms of worship. For example in the liturgy of St Basil, from the office of the *prothesis* to the eucharistic thanksgiving, the idea of the *philanthropia* of God is invoked fifteen times. The love of God for man is described as ineffable. God is characterized frequently as 'good and *philanthropos*'. He is 'merciful and a lover of man'; his love for man is 'untold and immeasurable'.

As such God is the life, the providence, and the hope of all afflicted, the protector of all in want, the restorer of justice, the reformer of an unjust social order, the mediator between adversaries who become brethren in God. However, God's instruments are not only the Son who redeems and the Spirit who sanctifies, but the reformed man who appropriates and imitates God's virtues.

By his innate nature, God manifests his *philanthropia* throughout his creation, as the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Restorer.<sup>1</sup> By grace and through the help of God, man can imitate God, even if imperfectly, as restorer and reformer of the human social order and the condition of all humanity in general.

The emphasis on the love which God communicates to men, and the divine experience to which man is invited, reveals the ethos of byzantine christianity, which is not so much psychological security, freedom from fear, or even doctrinal guidance, but communion with God. The doctrine of man as the likeness and the image of God leads to the doctrine about the deification of man. Thus to imitate God's *philanthropia* is 'to practise being god', as Clement of Alexandria formulated it. The imitator of God's *philanthropia* lives the very life of God. Byzantine liturgy and sacramental life point to a knowledge of God which is more than noölogical; it is a most intimate and personal relationship of the Father with his formerly rebellious son. Orthodox spirituality, and indeed all liturgical services, teach that God is not distant, abstract, remote and unapproachable, but that he is the Father whose name is *Philanthropos* and whose nature is *philanthropia*; that is, God's name and nature are love. 'And the more one loves God, the more he enters within God', as Clement of Alexandria writes.<sup>2</sup>

Man's imitation of God's love is not an ordinary stirring or movement of the soul but a divine gift which man is invited to appropriate. God responds to man's longings and cries, to man's faith and desire by imparting this 'divine energy' which induces a fire in

<sup>1</sup> Cf Maximus the Confessor, *Capita Theologica*, PG 91, 769.

<sup>2</sup> *Quis dives salvetur?* XXVI.

man's soul and wins it to God's divine love and will.<sup>1</sup>

The eleventh century mystic, St Symeon, calls God 'Holy Love'. In one of his homilies Symeon writes:

O Holy Love, he who does not know you has never tasted the sweetness of your mercies which only living experience can give us. But he who has known you, or who has been known by you, can never again have even the smallest doubt. For you are the fulfilment of the law, and you fill, burn, enkindle, embrace my heart with measureless charity. You are the teacher of the prophets, the faithful friend of the apostles, the strength of the martyrs, the inspiration of fathers and doctors, the perfecting of all the saints. And you, O Love, prepare even me for the true service of God.<sup>2</sup>

Thus the true lover of God is also a genuine lover of man. Elsewhere St Symeon projects love as the crown of all other virtues, such as humility, penitence, and faith. Love enables man to know the purpose of his divinity and his destiny upon the earth. Indeed the fulfilment and the end of man's life is to love and, through the experience of love, man is united with God. Symeon cries out in praise of love: 'O blessed bond, O indescribable strength, O heavenly disposition, how excellent is the soul which is animated by the divine inspiration and perfected in exceeding love of God and man'.<sup>3</sup>

Similar views were developed by Nicholas Kabasilas. In his famous commentary to the Divine Liturgy, Kabasilas called upon man to offer doxologies to God's exceeding and unfathomable *philanthropia* or love for man. Christ is the *Monos Philanthropos*, because he emptied himself of his supernatural exaltation, assuming human flesh in order to walk among his adopted brethren and draw them back to the eternal God.

Man's admiration and love for God transcends his knowledge and understanding. But because God's presence in the world is an existential reality, with concrete illustrations of his concern for the cosmos and man in particular, man ought to reciprocate and express his love for God with love for his fellow. Byzantine theology took very seriously the biblical reading:

<sup>1</sup> Cf Diadochos Photikes, *Ascetical Discourse* 59, *Sources Chrétiennes* (Paris, 1955), pp 93, 119, *et al.*

<sup>2</sup> Cited by Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (London, 1957), pp 212-213; PG 120, 422-3.

<sup>3</sup> Symeon the Younger, *Homily 22*: PG 120, 425; cited by J. M. Hussey, *Church and Learning in the Byzantine Empire* (New York, 1963), p 222.

If any one says 'I love God', and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should also love his brother.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of *philanthropia* assumes important meaning for our age, and is indeed relevant for any epoch. Because of God's example, the whole human family becomes the object of concern of all believers. The dialogue of love escapes the realm of sentimental yearning and transforms itself into a reality. On the basis of the same reasoning, Christ who manifested the Father's as well as his own agape for man, is acknowledged as the cosmic redeemer, drawing to himself all people who display a genuine concern for the destiny of the human family.

It is certain that the apophatic element dominates liturgical and patristic theology. God and the divine are beyond man's ability to comprehend. What we know is that God is 'he that is', and that 'God is infinite and incomprehensible; and all that is comprehensible about him is his infinity and incomprehensibility', to use the classic words of St John Damascene.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless God manifests his energies, including *philanthropia* which is the crown of them all. This property is ecumenical in character: it leads not only to the final restoration of justice and the salvation of man but includes the redemption of the all-creation, the realization of God's will for the participation of man in God's eternal life.

Since holiness is the life of the holy Spirit in human kind and an expression of God's indwelling presence, *philanthropia* becomes the chief manifestation of God's *parousia* in man. Thus in the prayer life of the Church emphasis is placed not so much on God's justice and condemnation, as on the realization of God's love for the redemption of man. This makes Orthodox theology an empirical theology. It emphasizes that man must live in the love of God, he must participate in it, he must reflect its spirit and implications, its suffering and its hope, in order for him to be in a position to comprehend it.

That the *Pantocrator* Christ was a favourite among the byzantines and was depicted in many icons is common knowledge. However, it is not widely known that even in iconography the byzantines presented Christ as the revelation of God's beneficence, charity, and love for man. The Lord was painted and described as the *Pantocrator*

<sup>1</sup> 1 Jn 4, 20-21.

<sup>2</sup> John Damascene, *De Fide Orthodoxa*, Bk 1, 4.

*Philanthropos*, or *Christos Eleemon* or *Christos Evergetes*.<sup>1</sup> Here we discover the ideal Christ delineated as the prototype whose deep agony for men must imitate and illustrate in their daily lives. The believer in and imitator of the *philanthropia* of God is no longer an individualist living by himself and for himself, but he becomes his 'brother's keeper'.

Throughout the divine liturgy and other mysteries or sacraments of the byzantine Church, one finds diffused a concept about God's search and agony for man. On the one hand there is the holiness and transcendence, the awe and mystery, the metaphysical wonder of God, while on the other hand there is stress on the realized immanence and presence, the 'unfathomable *philanthropia*' of God for man and his cosmos. It is because of his mercy, love, compassion for his creation that God condenses himself and walks among men in order to raise man to godhood. 'Lord have mercy upon us, you who suffered for us to free us from our iniquities, you who condensed yourself in order to raise us', as we sing in one of the Church's hymns.

The relationship between God and the mother of Jesus manifests the total relationship between God and man. The Almighty, the terrible and just God of the Old Testament becomes the *Philanthropos Theos*, the tender father of the New Testament. 'The King of the heavens because of his *philanthropia* appeared upon the earth and walked among men', we sing in another hymn.

Through the prayer life of the Church, God's concern for the restoration of man is underlined. Even though the attribute of justice in the nature of God is not rare, *philanthropia* is the overwhelming virtue of the heavenly Father. The incarnation of the Logos is the most eloquent manifestation of God's search for man. *Philánthropos ára o Theòs Philánthropos ára o Lógos*, writes St Athanasius.

God seeks man and encourages him to raise himself above the earthly. In the liturgy man glorifies God's great mercy; for without God's assistance, God's support and grace, man cannot surpass and elevate himself. It is because of God's constant manifestation of philanthropy that the weakling becomes mighty, the animal becomes human, the carnal becomes spiritual, and the spiritual sees the glory of the fountainhead from which he derives his strength, courage and achievement.

God manifested his love for man that man might learn to show

<sup>1</sup> See Brockhaus, Neinrich, *Die Kunst in den Athos Kloetern* (Leipzig, 1924), p 93; Felicetti-Liebenfels, Walter, *Geschichte der Byzantinischen Ikonmalerei* (Lausanne, 1956), p 78; Grabar, André, *La Peinture Religieuse en Bulgarie* (Paris, 1928), pp 120-121, illustration 37.

love to his fellow man. However, God's love is not an abstract theory, is not a yearning or a mere promise. It became actualized in the birth, sufferings, death and humiliation of his Son. Thus man's concern for his fellow man must be more than lip service, pure theology or an abstraction. Man should diffuse and reflect his philanthropy in his daily life. Man's need and misery, distress and hopelessness, the suffering of the weak brother must challenge the strong brother's altruistic involvement. St Nicholas Kabasilas writes that man must constantly remind himself of God's *philanthropia*, so that he may imitate it and practise it daily, even if imperfectly.

The byzantines viewed God as both Being, personal, individual, distinct from nature and man, and as Being itself, the Being in whom all other beings participate, in whom all existence moves, whom men apprehend as immediately as their own existence and come to know fully through their interactions and relationships with their fellow human beings.

On the basis of the theological meaning of history and interrelationships between men, the byzantine Church did not divorce the religious and social realms. She was pre-occupied both with the theological aspect of *philanthropia* and with the practical, with theory and social order. Church Fathers after the third century proclaimed from the pulpit, and indicated by their social concern, that religious and social activities cannot be rent apart. Thus men were called upon to treat each other as God had treated men and as co-adopted brethren.

God as *philanthropos* is a graeco-christian concept. Despite the great richness in the Old Testament conception of God,<sup>1</sup> there is no closeness of the Old Testament definition with the New Testament concept. 'God is a spirit', 'God is light' but God is above everything love.<sup>2</sup>

The New Testament notion of God as love is also greek in origin. The concept of God as *Philanthropos* that we encounter in the massive liturgical books of the Orthodox Church is not of semitic but of greek influence. Asclepius was known in greek antiquity as *Soter* and *Philanthropos*, names that found their sanctification in the christian vocabulary which added new dimensions to their semantics.

God is more than the Master or the Lord, King and Judge to whom men belong as subjects. In Orthodox liturgical theology God's relation to his people is not like the relationship between a

<sup>1</sup> See Kohlen, Ludwig, *Old Testament Theology*, tr. A.S. Todd (Philadelphia, 1957), pp 20 ff.

<sup>2</sup> Jn 4,24; 1 Jn 1,5; 1 Jn 4,8.

lord and his subjects, but like the relationship between two genuine friends. God is *Philanthropos Soter* who sacrifices himself for man.

Holiness stresses the unapproachability, the otherworldliness, while *philanthropia* stresses the immanence, the humanism and the indwelling of God in the world. The terrible God of the Old Testament is moderated by God's love for man. The lofty conception of God as a Being above all that is finite is modified by the teaching of God's increasing activity for man's perfection and ultimate salvation. God's absolute transcendence is reconciled with God's absolute involvement and activity, and is understood on account of the love of the Logos for man.

Since *eusebia* is really knowledge of worship of God, and faith is obedience to the will of God, man must imitate God's perfection in heart and in action. Man is both contemplation and action, loving thought and loving involvement.

Even though theology has rightly attributed numerous properties to God, it must be emphasized that *philanthropia* or love is the climax of all God's perfections and the real bond uniting all the qualities of God into one. Thus St John's definition sums up all the properties of God in these words: 'God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him'.

In relation to his creation, giving existence and life, guidance and purpose and, to men in particular, causing them to exist and supplying them physical, rational, and moral values, God is motivated by *philanthropia*. One of the hymns of Good Friday, in which we discover the might and the glory of Christ as well as his compassion and his love, concludes as follows: 'Have mercy upon us, Almighty Saviour: because of *philanthropia*, you suffered for us, reaching down to raise us up and to free us from our passions'.<sup>1</sup>

Byzantine theologians and religious thinkers emphasized love and mercy as chief qualities of God. It seems to me that they believed much more in the love of God than in his judgement or justice. The influence of John the Evangelist is evident. Very seldom do we encounter admonition to the sinner not to abuse the *philanthropia* of God, which might yield to his justice. I venture to suggest that in contrast to the christian West, which since the times of St Jerome had held a rather Old Testament concept of God, the God of the christian East was the personification and the manifestation of love. So much stress was laid upon the love of God that certain writers

<sup>1</sup> *Triodion*, Good Friday, 3rd aenos.



obliterate God's judgement into non-existence. Origen's theory of the final restitution of the cosmos to its pristine immateriality and primitive harmony, which was disrupted by man's rebellion against the Creator, essentially relies on the concept of the *philanthropia* of God. To the very end of the byzantine era the theological notion of God's love circulated strongly. Nicholas Kabasilas identified *philanthropia* with *agape* and described it as the ultimate definition of God's relationship to man.

The concept of *Theos Philanthropos* implies an understanding of history of a different dimension. One sees the continuity of creation from the event of cosmogony to the resurrection of life after Christ's victory over death. The *philanthropia* of God brought the world into being before time was, the *philanthropia* of God is unfolded in the historical person of Christ as it is perpetuated in the work of the holy Spirit. Therefore all events and all history is dominated by God's love in action – a love permanent, constant, developing – the same God who in every action unfolds his *philanthropia* for us.

Byzantine worship stresses the infinite love of God in the Trinity, God the Father who creates, God the Son who redeems, and God the holy Spirit who sanctifies, gives life and leads to a final recapitulation of God's redemptive process. As such, God is not removed from the cosmos but is on top of it and in it. His holy Church should be the personification of love. As the bride of a loving bridegroom, the Church must pursue a dialogue of love between her members and those outside her jurisdiction. On the basis of the love of God, there is hope and there is faith in the resurrection and the restoration of man and the cosmos, which is the eschatological quest and pursuit of man. Because of God's *philanthropia* for man, there is hope that through the grace of God men can come together as adopted sons under the fatherhood of God. In today's world the dialogue of love must be given pre-eminence. God needs our love as a response to his love. Our fellow man yearns for our compassion and altruistic love because in his alienation, loneliness and confusion he is hungry for other than material or intellectual values. God expects us to open our hearts that he may ignite in us his divine *philanthropia*.

There was a time when non-christians used to point at christians saying: 'Look how much they love each other'. Is it too much to expect from christians to love and embrace each other in the bosom of God? The scandalous divisions that have inflicted bleeding wounds upon the Body of Christ can be healed only when we love each other as God has loved us in his unfathomable *philanthropia*.