

Shining Light on Synergia: The Eastern Doctrine and Western Misconceptions

The Eastern Orthodox doctrine of synergia is often unknown in the West, or if known, largely misunderstood, especially by Protestants. Yet, an understanding of this doctrine is essential to comprehend properly Eastern Orthodox belief. It is also important to the history of the Orthodox faith as synergia is deeply rooted in the Patristic tradition. In order to illuminate the differences between the Western and Eastern views I will address two topics: grace and free will through the Pelagian controversy and the opposing Eastern view, and predestination as understood in light of this.

Many of the differences between Western and Eastern understandings of faith and grace originate with the Pelagian controversy of the fifth century. Pelagius was a Western monk and the response of the Church was largely the work of St. Augustine, a Western bishop. As such, the controversy had little effect on the Eastern Church. The manner in which St. Augustine responded to Pelagius would have a profound effect on the understanding of the Western Church and later on the Reformers of the sixteenth century.

Pelagius believed that man naturally had the capacity within himself, through his free will, to reach out to God. He believed that humans had not been impaired by sin but were wholly capable of avoiding sin. All that man needed was the moral example which Christ provided, and humanity had to conform itself to. Grace in no way impeded or impacted human free will. Rather, God's grace was in creation to provide for our free will, and in His revelation to teach us how to perform good works. For Pelagius, salvation was something dependent on man who attained God by doing good works. (Gonzalez 100)

St. Augustine formulated his theology to counter Pelagianism. Due to sin, people can in no way save themselves and because of original sin they are worthy of damnation from birth, truly being a mass of damnation. Salvation is, therefore, wholly a work of God's grace which in turn produces good works in us; even faith is a gift of grace. The result is that salvation is in no way dependent on people but wholly on the gift of God's grace. (Gonzalez 100-103)

Quite in contrast to the West, questions of predestination and free will were never a significant issue and the work of Augustine did not make its way East. In turn, there was no Eastern Reformation.

The East acknowledges two realities operative for our salvation, both of which are important. First, all things require God's grace. Second, God does not give people grace without the cooperation of their free will. Both God and man have an operative role in salvation. This is why it is called synergia, which literally means "working together." St. Nicholas Cabasilas explains it this way, "There is an element which derives from God, and another which derives from our own zeal. The one is entirely His work, the other involves striving on our part. However, the latter is our contribution only to the extent that we submit to His grace..." (qtd. in Whiteford and Barnes). It is by the active exercise of our free will submitting to the grace of God and cooperating to perform good works that God commands "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (NIV,

Phil. 2.12). Eastern Orthodoxy does not teach salvation by works, as grace is wholly necessary to every part of the process. Dr. John Karmiris illuminates this point when he writes, "Divine Grace alone, without free will and cooperation of man, does not complete man's salvation; nor much less does human will alone, without the Divine Grace, bring it about" (76-77).

To appreciate Orthodoxy's perspective one must understand why free will is so key to its theology. For Orthodoxy, free will is central, as its theology is so closely tied to our relationship with the Trinity through Jesus in the process of theosis. Love is the very means by which we relate to God and for love to exist man must have free will to choose it. Nor could God have simply compelled us to love Him or do good as part of our nature. As Nikolaos P. Vassiliadis explains, "Freedom means the ability and the convenience of movement. A definitive crystallization of the will only to do good implies a certain binding and enforced movement toward a predetermined direction. But this is precisely the deprivation of freedom." The capacity for free choice is never completely dissoluble by sin as it is a fundamental aspect of our being, having been made in the Image of God (Ware 59). Free will is itself foundational to the entire Eastern theological vision.

Having shown how St. Augustine refuted Pelagius, it is important to show that synergia is not Semipelagian, a movement condemned by the Council of Orange. Unfortunately, St. John Cassian, who the East understands to be a good witness to the patristic consensus on the topic, has long been labeled as Semipelagian despite never being condemned by any council. His continued association with Semipelagianism has resulted in many Protestants falsely characterizing the East's doctrine of synergia as Semipelagian.

The difference between full fledged Pelagianism and Semipelagianism is merely a matter of grace. For Pelagius, grace had no substantive role in our salvation, whereas Semipelagianism admits its necessity. However, in Semipelagianism it was still the human who had the capacity to reach out to God first. Human action had to precede any movement on the part of God, making salvation brought about by human initiative (Thibodaux). Synergia teaches that the human can never initiate salvation, or be the first to reach out to God. As has already been shown, man can only cooperate with the grace God gives him, which God will not give if cooperation is refused. Karmiris confirms this saying, "The Divine Grace is somehow the motivating power, which starts man on the working-out of his own salvation, and moreover pushes him uninterruptedly and accompanies him (the saved man) until the end" (76). In synergia it is only grace that starts man in the process, man does not start grace.

St. John Cassian has often been misunderstood as teaching that it is man who makes the first move towards God by having faith, which God rewards with His grace. Cassian writes

And so the manifold wisdom of God grants with manifold and inscrutable kindness salvation to men; and imparts to each one according to his capacity the grace of His bounty, so that He wills to grant His healing not according to the uniform power of His Majesty but according to the measure of the faith in which He finds each one, or as He Himself has imparted it to each one. (emphasis added, Cassian chap. 15)

This would seem to indicate Cassian did promote Semipelagianism, as salvation is imparted according to the measure of each one's faith, suggesting that grace only follows after the faith of man. To take this passage on its own would be unfair to Cassian, although many do so. He continues in the next chapter of the same work saying

But let no one imagine that we have brought forward these instances to try to make out that the chief share in our salvation rests with our faith, according to the profane notion of some who attribute everything to free will and lay down that the grace of God is dispensed in accordance with the desert of each man. (emphasis added, Cassian chap. 16)

It is clear that while Cassian may not have been a systematic thinker as Augustine, he is nonetheless not Semipelagian in his teaching and a legitimate expression of the Eastern doctrine of synergia. He concisely expresses the essence of synergia elsewhere, saying "These two then; viz., the grace of God and free will seem opposed to each other, but really are in harmony" (Cassian chap. 11). (Seraphim)

Having exonerated St. John Cassian, it is now important to turn to the Council of Orange. A careful reading of the document issued by the council shows its purpose was to condemn the Semipelagian idea that humans could reach out to God apart from grace. The council explains in its conclusion, "in every good work it is not we who take the initiative and are then assisted through the mercy of God, but God himself first inspires in us both faith in him and love for him without any previous good works of our own that deserve reward." Further in the conclusion, the council, far from condemning a synergistic understanding, seems to endorse it. "According to the catholic faith we also believe that after grace has been received through baptism, all baptized persons have the ability and responsibility, if they desire to labor faithfully, to perform with the aid and cooperation of Christ what is of essential importance in regard to the salvation of their soul" (emphasis added). The Council of Orange condemns Semipelagianism, not synergia, and goes so far as to assert that cooperation is necessary. (Thibodaux)

The East wholeheartedly affirmed the criticisms Augustine leveled against Pelagius and the condemnation of Pelagianism. The issue between East and West was not whether or not Pelagius was wrong; he was. The problem was how Augustine had gone about responding to the heresy. Vladimir Lossky succinctly explains, "grace is not a reward for the merit of the human as Pelagianism would have it; but no more is it the cause of the 'meritorious acts' of our free will. For it is not a question of merits but of a co-operation..." (Lossky 198).

Augustine's error was that he unnecessarily accepted one of the key premises of Pelagius's teaching, namely that grace and works have a kind of temporally sequential relationship. Lossky again summarizes, "The fundamental error of Pelagius was that of transposing the mystery of grace onto a rational plane...where there was no possibility of the question ever being resolved" (Lossky 198). The result was that, while Augustine successfully refuted Pelagius and routed out the heresy in the Church, he also left the Church with a model of grace and good works. Grace was the work of God alone, while good works were of a person's free will. This created an opposition between grace and

free will that when taken to its logical conclusion had to necessarily favor one to the detriment of the other.

This view saw everything as parts of a whole, grace in economic terms, as if it were money to be traded (Stramara). In this way, salvation becomes an equation such as $10+1=11$, where 10 is God's grace, and 1 is human works. The objection is if man contributes even only 1 by his free will he has done something to save himself and is not wholly dependent on God's grace. To the Eastern Orthodox it is not this way at all. The equation of synergia, if there can be such a thing, is $10 \times 1 = 10$ and $10 \times 0 = 0$, where 1 is belief and 0 is unbelief. Our cooperation is then not something that contributes to salvation, but rather the means by which God operates, never wishing to subvert our own will. Grace and free will are not in opposition, but they co-operate together so that God's will may be brought about in people. (Whiteford)

John Calvin was one Reformer who drew out the implications of Augustinian doctrine to an extreme. His recognition of the problem of free will versus grace led him to solve it by placing everything completely on God and His grace. Total depravity and unconditional election are just two outgrowths of this conclusion. In the Augustinian construct it seemed necessary that, in order to not be Pelagian, God's grace had to be favored above all else, free will losing all meaning and becoming only a name. Salvation for Calvin was monoergistic, the only operative power in salvation being God's grace, unconditionally and irresistibly given.

Having discussed the doctrine of synergia as regards faith and works, we will now turn to the doctrine of predestination. As already discussed, Augustine understood all people to be damned due to their sin. Out of this *massa damnata*, God elected some to whom He would give His grace. It is important to note that the Roman Catholic Church rejected Augustine's later views on predestination. They did not go to waste, however, and found more extreme expression in John Calvin. Using the Augustinian model, Calvin, having already concluded humans have no free will because free will cannot be opposed to grace, developed his doctrine of double predestination. In this understanding, not only does God elect who will be saved before the creation of the world, but He also selects who will be condemned.

With synergia in place in the East, it is clear that they come to a markedly different conclusion. It is apparent that all Christians must acknowledge predestination to some degree, as Paul frequently uses the term in his letters. It is the way in which this word is understood and defined that makes all the difference. The Eastern Orthodox do believe people are predestined, but only insofar as God foreknows how people will exercise their free will.

An oft quoted verse seen as evidence for predestination is Romans 8:29-30 which says "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified." This is used to show that God must foreordain, and so determine to call specific people and not others. It is only those who are predestined to be called according to God's sovereign will that will be saved.

St. John Chrysostom is a very important Eastern Church father and explains the meaning of this verse in Homily XV. He says that God “showeth even upon other grounds His concern for us by saying, that things were fore-ordered in this way from the beginning. For men have to derive from things their conceptions about them, but to God these things have been long determined upon, and from of old He bare good-will toward us...” (emphasis added). At first this may seem to support a deterministic position, but if we look closer we see that Chrysostom is contrasting the limitations of men who have to derive things from their limited perceptions, to the all seeing and all knowing God who perceives all things even through time. Chrysostom uses the example of St. Matthew to explain how foreknowledge is able to operate such that God’s election is unfathomable to us. However, while election may seem arbitrary, he wholly affirms that it is not. While St. Matthew at first seemed to be the worst of sinners, and even worse yet, a tax collector, God “knew the pearl though lying in the mire, and after passing by others, and being well pleased with the beauty of this, He elected it, and by adding to the noble born free-will grace from Himself, He made it approved” (Homily XVI). Here we see the doctrine of synergia at work. God is the initiator of all grace, but still requires our cooperation. God knows those who will freely cooperate from all eternity by virtue of His foreknowledge and in this way He predestines people to the election of sons.

In an article on predestination, Bishop Elias Minastios explains by saying “God desires, and if man desires also, then he or she is already predestined.” Predestination is only fixed and definite insofar as God’s foreknowledge exists outside of time and space. In time our predestination to glory can change according to whether or not we still desire God. Many people are easily confused by the idea of foreknowledge and think that foreknowledge necessitates predetermination. If God knows events beforehand and He cannot be wrong, then there is nothing a person can do to change their fate. Minastios likens God’s foreknowledge to a mirror. It passively reflects the choices that people make in their lives, but it is not an active power. Foreknowledge does not cause someone to take on the hideousness of sin anymore than an actual mirror causes someone’s physical grotesqueness.

The end result of both Western and Eastern theology then comes into focus. Augustine’s influence in the West sent the Roman Catholic Church down a road of ever troubling tension between grace and free will. The Eastern church avoided that pitfall. Later Calvin took Augustine’s ideas to their logical conclusion resulting in doctrines that horrified Roman Catholics and resulted in completely monergistic Calvinism with its deterministic understanding of predestination. The East again avoided any dilemma as regards predestination because it lacked the problematic issues that the doctrine was developed in order to solve.

For all of the complexity of the topic it is unsurprising that many Christians do not pay it much attention. This is not because it is unimportant, but simply because they live it. Theophane the Recluse explains this in a very insightful observation, “Theorists are greatly preoccupied with the question of the relationship between grace and free will. For anyone with grace within him, the question is resolved. Anyone who bears grace within himself offers and surrenders himself to its all-embracing action, and it is grace that acts in him” (qtd. in Spidlik 102). Oftentimes the most profound theology is not something theologians speculate about, but something lived out by the faithful.

Personal Reflection on Synergia

I am drawn to synergia because I think it so effectively answers Calvinism and Reformed theology. When I first read John Cassian's Conferences I found his discussions on grace and free will to be the most illuminating I had ever read. There seemed to be a certain common sense about it that I never felt Augustine's writing on the topic ever had. Yet, my enthusiasm for Cassian was quickly squelched as I read him consistently associated with Semipelagianism by any number of different authors. I assumed if his direction had been condemned as heretical then I had to pursue other avenues of thought, which I did. It is only recently that I have come to understand that synergia was never condemned, and is probably the more historical position that had existed before Augustine. In many ways it is tragic that there are not more readily accessible responses from the Eastern Orthodox to all of the erroneous charges of Semipelagianism that Protestants so often level against them.

I think that synergia is an important counter to Calvinism that corrects all of its excesses. Calvinist/Reformed theology has become ever more pervasive in Evangelical churches and Time magazine recently named "New Calvinism", which is little more than Calvinism in a modern package, as one of the most powerful ideas changing the world (Biema). I find this very disheartening in that for all the excesses of Pelagianism, Calvinism is just as extreme, simply in the other theological direction.

This "New Calvinism" does violence to theology maintaining that it is not deterministic, when it is, and claiming that it maintains free will, when it doesn't. It does this by turning theology into a kind of sophistry by which what is meant by free will is redefined so that man still has free will when he loves God, but could not do otherwise, something that is logically contradictory. Furthermore, it does all this to assert the "sovereignty of God", as if it is necessary for God to actually control every single thing, rather than God merely having the potential to do so. This arbitrarily changes the meaning of the concept of sovereignty itself.

I think that the importance of synergia, and what makes it appeal to me as someone coming from a Protestant background, is that it provides the very means for any relationship with God to take place. Humans are not merely a passive being to be acted upon, but have a real role. I can then love because I could do otherwise. I can glorify God because I could do otherwise. This is what makes it meaningful to me, not that it somehow elevates the human person, but that it allows people to truly love God.

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