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Social Theology: the Theological Ethics of the Common Life.
An Intellectual Itinerary

ABSTRACT
OF
THE HABILITATION THESIS

Argument: *The case for theology as social science*

The academic disciplines of theology (however diverse its tenets and practices) and social sciences (particularly sociology, political science, ethnography and anthropology) are usually considered to be conceptually and methodologically far removed from each other. And indeed they must be, not least because the social sciences are the eminent product of the radical secularization of knowledge in the 19th and 20th centuries. A secular society provided itself with the intellectual tools necessary for making sense of its fabric and working, of its structure and functions, of its principles and preferences. As Max Weber famously claimed, the social sciences ought to be *wertfrei*, value-free, released from the duty to seek a fundamental truth lying beneath the social processes and hence to probe human behavior against some received ethical standards and pass judgment on it according to an authoritative and consensual moral code or meta-narrative.

For this reason, the social sciences tend to operate as either overt or implicit counter-theologies of the secular age, having often times recourse – as John Milbank has persuasively argued – to disguised theological concepts and theological ways of reasoning turned on their head. However, an almost overall agreement emerged in the last three decades on the fact that the social sciences are at a crossroad. It seems that political science and sociology are not able any more to accurately describe, fully explain and thoroughly understand the transformations that have recently and dramatically occurred in Western societies and in democratic politics. This manifest crisis of the social sciences is the clear sign that the instruments of analysis they are accustomed to use cannot account for the current predicament of both society and politics.

My contention is that theology is strategically placed in the realm of knowledge in order for its proponents to take over – or rather take back – the task of unveiling the nature, purposes and meaning of society and politics in the present post-secular and post-democratic setting. At first glance, it may seem both presumptuous and audacious to state that theology could recover the position it once had (in St Thomas Aquinas times for instance), that of the supreme science of everything human examined in the transparency of the Revelation, including the assessment of power, violence and the social bond that make community possible. Given that the social sciences have eventually failed in taking the real measure of how we can live together in society and under a political rule as dignified and free persons, it is worth trying to look for a theological answer to this fundamental question. This tentative answer that theology may be able to provide, should include the innumerable valid findings and some of the methodology of the social sciences, but would decisively need to move away from any explanation imbedded in the secular reason alone.

I came to this intellectual stand from quite far away, but I travelled all along with the assumption that Western societies in general and Romanian society in particular were always somehow informed if not shaped by the language and the institutions of the Christian faith, even during the secular age (including the Communist regime). It was not therefore an accident that I began my academic journey as a student of the byzantine and post-byzantine period. After a rather disappointing intellectual venture in political science, I intend to distill my long experience as a researcher and educator in the service of theology. I hereby recount my itinerary.

The theological journey

The first four stages of my theological coming of age were largely entrenched in my research and teaching career as a Byzantinologist and then as a political scientist, more precisely a political theorist. I started in 1984 by exploring the theology of the image¹. I

¹ Daniel Barbu, *Manuscrite bizantine în colecții din România*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1984, 63 pp. + XXXVI pl.; Idem, „Note on the Bucharest *Penitential Canon* (Library of the Academy ms.gr. 1294)”, *Revue des Études Sud-Est Européennes* XXVII, no. 1-2, 1989, pp. 15-25; Idem, *Pictura murală din Țara Românească în secolul al XIV-lea*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1986, 111 pp. + 100 pl.; Idem, „L’Église et l’Empereur au XIV^e siècle selon le témoignage de la peinture murale de Valachie”, *Revue Roumaine d’Histoire* XXXIV, no. 1-2, 1995, pp. 131-139; Idem, „Les sources byzantines de la peinture murale en Valachie au XIV^e siècle”, *Cahiers Balkaniques* 21, 1994, pp. 7-19; Idem, „Le schisme des images”, in *Culture et politique*, textes réunis par Alexandru Duțu et Norbert Dodille, Éditions l’Harmattan, Paris, 1995, pp. 97-101; Idem, „L’image byzantine : production et usages”, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 51, no. 1, 1996, pp. 71-92; Idem, „Византийский образ: создание и способы использования”, in A. Gourevitch, S. Loutchitskaja, éditeurs, *Анналы на рубеже веков: Антология*, Académie des Sciences de la Russie, Institut d’Histoire Générale, Le XXI siècle – L’Entente, Moscou, 2002, pp. 58-78.

studied extensively the Byzantine illustrated manuscripts preserved in the Romanian public collections, of which (Library of the Academy ms.gr. 1294, for instance) some proved to be outstanding examples of a theological reflection by means of a visual language. In the margin of this endeavor, I contributed to the understanding of the diversity of the forms of monastic spirituality in the Oriental Christendom before hesychasm². I also showed how the Byzantine mural paintings at the princely church of Curtea de Argeș illustrate and incorporate original elements of the theological debates of the Constantinopolitan 14th century. These researches led me to further explore the relations between Church and Empire in the late Byzantine period³ and, eventually, the Byzantine legacy in the making of an original Romanian expression of Christian faith⁴.

The dissertation: *The political theology of the post-secular societies*⁵

Romanian society appears to be rather culturally homogenous after the collective historical experience of Communism and seems to have remained cohesive and consensual in its opinions all along the process of European integration. It looks like the fall of the unanimous and publicly unchallenged ideology enforced under state socialism called for another form of collective consent with respect to values, moral norms, cultural references and accepted behavior. By its mere, but monumental social presence (in the media, in the army, in hospitals and prisons, in public schools, during all major political events), legally or tacitly approved by the state, the Church(s) provided such an opportunity for consensus and was perhaps able to fulfill the need for a substitutive cultural authority.

Indeed, the tight interweaving of religion and culture in an order of civilization fusing a national church, a traditional sense of family, a cultural denial of modernity and an unconcealed distrust in equality resembles retrospectively some of the traits of what Charles Taylor has dubbed as the ‘Age of Mobilization’ foregoing the Secular Age he extensively explored. Indeed, if secularization implies that all individuals have equal entitlement to phrase or rephrase the public arguments used in a political space which does not admit

² Daniel Barbu, „Note despre spiritualitatea creștinismului răsăritean în secolele VIII-XII”, in André Vauchez, *Spiritualitatea Evului Mediu Occidental. Secolele VIII-XII*, traducere de Doina Marian și Daniel Barbu, Editura Meridiane, București, 1994, pp. 167-190.

³ Daniel Barbu, *Byzance, Rome et les Roumains. Essais sur la production politique de la foi au Moyen Âge*, Éditions Babel, Bucarest, 1998, 194 pp.

⁴ Daniel Barbu, *Bizanț contra Bizanț. Explorări în cultura politică românească*, Editura Nemira, București, 2001, 303 pp.

⁵ Daniel Barbu, *Au cetățenii suflet? O teologie politică a societăților post-seculare*, Editura Vreamea, București, 2016, 456 pp.; Idem, „The Geopolitics of the European Spirit in Post-secular Romania”, in Justine Lacroix and Kalipso Nicolaïdis, editors, *European Stories. Intellectual Debates on Europe in National Contexts*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 2010, pp. 241-256.

another resource than natural reason, Romanian political culture was never really secular, inasmuch as the autonomy of politics is hypothesized as a distinctive feature of secularism. The liberal parliamentarism of the 19th century and of the first part of the 20th century believed that politics was contingent on the destiny of the nation, while state socialism treated politics as a dependent superstructure of an implacable meaning of history better explained by economic and social processes. Post-communism laid a comparable claim on politics. There was always something, a deeper and more significant essence, to look for beyond the realm of politics, although not in all circumstances and for all persuasions this something else was the same.

In order to explore this pre-political essence, I took into account the political and cultural weight of the Church in the Romanian public life. In all surveys, the Church enjoys a higher level of trust when compared to institutions such as the military, the government, the parliament or the media and has sufficient political clout to have determined, in 2007, the Ministry of Education to ban from high school handbooks any reference to the theory of evolution. Though, the proportion of regular church-goers may not exceed the European average of about 8-10%. In all probability and at the level of individual behavior, Romanians are statistically living in secular times.

Therefore, the influence of the Church in the public square may be better understood by using the concept of 'vicarious religion', coined by Grace Davie in order to describe a situation where a minority of organized professionals perform religious acts in the name and place of a majority that do not necessarily behave as instructed by this qualified practitioners, but is aware of and agrees upon what they are doing on behalf of the community. In such a conceptual pattern, personal commitment to religious values and practices may be scarce, loose and socially inconspicuous. Indeed, it is not to the institution as such that public opinions look up for explicit political direction. Instead, most aspects of the current political culture seem to be firmly encoded by a Christian traditional ethos. The style, and sometimes even the content of the post-communist intellectual debates on political issues, the common understanding of personal and institutional accountability, the model of family life still benchmarked by baptism, marriage in church and religious funerals, the perception of the functional divisions cutting across society, have all taken shape in a religious context that is still at work and did not lose its authority even under state socialism.

Questioning political theology: *For a theological deconstruction of politics*⁶

In order to grasp the position of the theological-political question in democratic and post-democratic political debates and processes, I looked at the ways and means through which particular societies (the Romanian one especially, but not only) abided by, if not consented to the political techniques marshaled from above in order to differentiate between the rulers and the ruled. In so doing, I collected, categorized, uncovered when necessary and capitalized on serial evidence of those expressions of politics – be them sectional, local, partisan or partial – engendered in an autonomous manner by national societies. A proper theological examination of the nature of politics implied that I had to revisit but not narrate the entwined logic of assent and dissent, contention and participation, and finally take advantage of the diagram of the ongoing disaffection with democracy. The query was focused on those forms of consent which were not proposed or imposed by the nation-states and the political and bureaucratic personnel that embodied them with the intention of establishing and increasing their legitimacy.

The surmise underlining my investigation was that any valid examination of the forms taken by political consent, apprehended as the reason of democracy, may grant the benefit of historical depth to the transformations that the corporeality of democracy, as embodied by the European nation-states (both Western and Eastern), had to cope with after the juncture of 1989. The suffering and the deprivation of personal and public liberties that were inherent in state socialism did not engender ever since a collective *memoria passionis*, a socially 'dangerous memory' (in the language of Johann Baptist Metz). That is why, unlike the reason of state, justified by a clear – though often concealed – end deployed in time and limited in scope, post-communist common life is affected by what St Thomas Aquinas named 'unassailable ignorance' and therefore evades the temporal and spatial determinations of politics, calling for the theological reason able to restore the social bond and the dignity of living together.

A theological venture: *Why love is the riddle of history solved and the social bond that knows the sovereignty of Christ*

In 1844, Karl Marx wrote that „communism is the riddle of history solved and knows itself to be the solution”. History itself, notably the history of communism in Central and Eastern Europe, proved him wrong. The conundrum of how men go together through the

⁶ Daniel Barbu, *Între timp. Amintiri din casa Cezarului*, Editura Litera, București, 2017, 430 pp.

experience of time remained not only unsolved, but became even more unintelligible. However, unbeknownst to Marx and his philosophical and political followers, the solution was already advanced in the Gospel: love, love given as *agapē* and love shared as *philia*. Love may be therefore not only the exact opposite of politics, but also an alternative to politics to the extent it facilitates the widest recognition of the actual sovereignty of Christ over history and human destiny.

When searching for the most appropriate method of understanding the contending relation between politics and love in the Western intellectual tradition we may find some inspiration in the parable of the cracked pot imagined in 1942 by Ernst Kantorowicz. When a pot falls into pieces it could be treated in two very diverse ways, both of them providing exemplary, yet opposite answers to the question: is a scattering of potsherds still a pot? The housewife looks at the broken pieces and reasonably concludes that the pot cannot be used anymore and therefore is no more and casts the worthless fragments into the garbage. An archeologist on the other hand would be of a different opinion; he or she would assume that the pot does in fact still exist even fallen asunder, even stuffed at the bottom of the garbage heap, would strive to collect each and every piece, would put them on display and use imagination, educated intuition and literary knowledge of the shapes and sizes of ancient pots in order to figure out how the pot looked like before it cracked.

What is the relevance of this parable for the topic at hand? If we assume, as we should, that politics and love were both commendable objects of inquiry for human wisdom at the Greek origins of our intellectual tradition, in Plato and Aristotle for instance, and that they were sometimes thought to be rooted in the same movement of the mind called desire, we might as well consider them as part of the same intellectual artifact, as an old and precious pot, be it only for the sake of the argument. From the modern times on, when philosophy itself ceased to be practiced as a form of love, *philia*, and turned into metaphysics, into a search for truth grounded in reason, love as social bond, discussed upon in ancient Greek ethics under the guise of affectionate friendship became a marginal topic in philosophical investigations. Precisely because the topic does not fit well into the modern sphere of knowledge organized around reason and will and suspicious of anything that looks like being governed by feelings, passions or inclinations. If there is, since the 17th century, an impressive body of persuasive scholarly works on politics, philosophers completely abandoned any effort to consider love a concept worth being explored. The *ego cogitans* totally dismissed the *ego amans*. Let us recognize therefore that the philosopher matches the figure of the housewife in Kantorowicz' parable. The ancient Greek pot made from the clay of

love, either for wisdom or for other humans, was broken and consequently useless and as such cast to the rubbish heap of the history of philosophy. Who is then the archeologist? Hopefully, the theologian may stand for this figure. For him or her, the pot of knowledge, fallen into pieces as it is, deserves to be recovered, reassembled, imagined as it once was, preserved, and thoroughly researched.

Reconstructed and displayed, the pot is sometimes visited incidentally by a philosopher went astray from metaphysics, such as Jean-Luc Marion, one of the few contemporary thinkers to believe in the integrity of the pot and to question the fact that it was actually broken beyond repair by the housewives of the modern times. By mining for the ore of a philosophy that would not be marshaled by the being, by what it is, he made his way through the abandoned gallery of mystical theology. Following the instructions of Aristotle, modern philosophy intends *to tell what it is*. And if philosophy would rather *tell what it is not*, rejoins Marion? The *ego cogito, ergo sum* as starting point of any sound philosophical investigation could be subverted and eventually replaced by a different assumption, one in the way of: *ego amo, ergo non sum*. This radical reduction of certainty, to use Marion's description of his own method, cannot avoid wrestling with probably the most famous conversation on love and friendship ever recorded, the one that actually closes the Gospels in John 21:15-19:

The importance of the text, outside the sphere of biblical studies and textual criticism, was already seized in a philosophical key by Kierkegaard, who described the condition of love as social bond with these words: 'to be absolutely certain of being loved is not to love, since this means to stand above the relationship between friend and friend'. Both Kierkegaard and Marion connect in the mirror the three persistent questions, yet not entirely identical, to the three denials of Peter during Jesus' trial, prophesized by the Christ and previously recalled by John 18:15-27. It is as if the three affirmations of love had to make amends for the three rejections of friendship.

In fact, Peter acts at Gethsemane and in the high priest's courtyard as a true and zealous friend. He first wants to protect his teacher at the cost of another man's life. Later, his own life or at least his freedom may be at stake. At this precise time, in denying any acquaintance with Jesus, Peter denudes himself of his personal history as a zealot-minded Jew as one who used to have plans for the restoration of Israel by his master in whom he clearly recognized once the Messiah, the one able to fulfill the hope of his people for an age of liberty, abundance and peace. In the courtyard, Peter stripped himself off everything he was thought in his family, in his village or in his synagogue about the upcoming deliverer King

promised by God through the ancient prophets. He states his nakedness: I am not what anyone may think I am and I myself used to think I was. *Ego non sum*. Now, so to speak, Peter is in the mood for love. He can tell his resurrected master: *ergo amo*. And this is not something new Peter managed to know about himself, but he knows he is in love not by himself, but because Christ knows he now is able to love. He knows he loves only because he knows someone else knows he loves.

This love he confesses trice is not of his own making. The Christ already explained in John 14:15-17 how it may come about. And the commandments the disciples have to keep are clear and often time repeated: love God and love your neighbor. How exactly? Surely not by merely saying 'I love you'. As Kierkegaard remarked, love told does not bring about certainty and oftentimes undermines love itself. To say 'I love you' as Peter was asked, should be understood according to Marion as a perlocutionary act of speech: by saying something we trigger a consequence, sometimes of a performative type. Tend my sheep, says the resurrected Jesus, follow me, he concludes.

What does it mean to follow the sovereign Christ is made perfectly clear in Matthew 16:24: 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me'. This act comes with a price in Matthew 10:37-39: 'Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.' To deny one's own self unambiguously means in this context to abandon all forms of individual love based on character and personal history. You need first to walk in the footsteps of Peter in the courtyard of the high priest and say to whoever is asking about who you are and what you have done in your life: 'I am not'. Before such a time, 'you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished'. After that moment or process 'someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go.' It is not necessarily a matter of old age as opposed to youth, as Jesus metaphorically suggests to Peter. Once you become a follower and perform the acts of love, reason and will appear inconsequential, because the Spirit of truth may lead you in places you do not normally want to go and make you experience what you would not sensibly want to go through. To borrow T.S. Eliot's choice of words (Little Gidding V), loving is *a condition of complete simplicity (costing not less than everything)*.

As John (or a later hand intending to make things as plain as possible) duly explains, death is the wage of love lived as discipleship. 'I die every day!' (*kath'hēmeran apothnēskō*),

confirms Paul (1 Corinthians 15: 31). And it is for Dietrich Bonhoeffer to add the sober warning: *jeder Ruf Christi führt in den Tod*, every call of Christ leads unto death. The loving life of a disciple of Christ is therefore naked because it has been and remains in all imaginable circumstances stripped of all the forms and ways of life that cohere into a qualified life (*bios*) and becomes sacred because it is permanently exposed to death. Reading John, we have reached unintentionally the key concept of *bare life* on which Giorgio Agamben built much of his work.

The nudity of life or *nuda vita* emerges first as the translation of Walter Benjamin's *das bloße Leben*, which appears in a number of his essays from the late 1910s and early 1920s and names a life shorn of all qualification and conceived as independent of its traditional predicates and attributes. Agamben de-contextualizes Benjamin's concept and inserts it in a discourse containing a number of different and heterogeneous implications. Naked, Agamben writes in the final pages of *Homo sacer*, corresponds, in the sequence 'naked life' to the Greek term *haplōs* (single, simple) by which classical ontology used to define pure Being. Thus, he points to an analogy between Western metaphysics and Western politics, insofar as the fundamental function of both is the isolation of a primary essence deprived by any exogenous determination. For metaphysics this core is the pure Being, which constitutes man as *thinking animal*, whereas for politics it is naked life, which constitutes man as *social animal*. Metaphysics and politics are therefore intertwined essentially in the quest for a foundation and a meaning which are linked constitutively. Pure Being and naked life, as object matters of metaphysics and politics, are construed as 'unthinkable', as the limit against which both are doomed to collide. In *Mezzi senza fine*, Agamben insists on the inherent 'unutterability' and 'impenetrability' of life in its basic existence and opposes it to the *forme di vita*, to the 'ways of life proper to men'. As the purest and elementary building block of all power relations, *nuda vita* is prone to be seized and reshaped by political power because politics ought to, in order to be able to manifest itself as the only possible solution to the riddle of history, be able at all times to suspend life and dispose of it arbitrarily.

That is precisely why, in order to dwell into a love that is 'strong as death', according to the Song of Solomon 8,6, and to be led by it, the disciple has to evade the grip of any political power and accept the sovereignty of Christ. In Roman law, the slave, animated exclusively by bare life understood biologically as *zoē*, had no *persona*, and therefore was not permitted to wear a mask in the public realm, as any legal-political person was entitled and supposed to; the slave was definitely *aprosōpos* and as such had to be represented by the one to whom he belonged.

That is why there never was a genuine iconography or liturgy of love, or a public manifestation thereof, for God does not take into account the *persona* of man, *ou prosōpolētēs* (Romans 2:11). Christ is for all his disciples the mask they have to wear when looking at one another and facing the world. Indeed, writes Paul in Galatians 3:27-28, 'as many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.' Christ is the cloth and the make up for all who recognize his sovereign power. Love is therefore the exact opposite of politics, as they both compete for the bare life.

That is why Tertullian in his *Apology* is obliged to make an ultimate statement: *Nec ulla magis res aliena quam publica*, no matter is more alien to us than public matters, whatever pertains to the *res publica*. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt rightly relates this position less to the early eschatological expectations of most Christians than to Jesus' teaching of goodness, a principle known in the Western world only with the rise of Christianity. Christian hostility towards the public realm and the inclination to lead a life far removed from the public eyes is a consequence of the early Christian devotion to goodness, to good works. Arendt's language is obviously modern, and very much in debt to moral philosophy. Where she writes about goodness and good works, a Christian theologian would immediately and accurately read *love* and *works of love*.

Following Arendt's argument, I did operate this necessary replacement. When a good deed becomes public, widely known, she continues, it loses its good character, when goodness appears openly it is no longer goodness. Bare life, as the seat of love, is unutterable and impenetrable insisted Agamben. Works of love can be really accomplished only for love's sake. 'Let not your left hand know what your right hand does; do not your alms before men, to be seen by them', Christians were told by their master. Love is indisputable when it is not perceived even by its very agent, defined by nudity of life, hence no one should see oneself performing works of love, because such works would become mere social work in the service of a society ruled by a sovereign power. Foreboding to some extent the reasoning of Agamben, Arendt identifies the 'curious negative quality of goodness (i.e. love) which ought to lack any outward phenomenal manifestation.'

As if she had Kantorowicz's pot in mind, Arendt further surmises that love of goodness and love of wisdom would cancel themselves altogether should they exhaust themselves into the activity of philosophizing or doing good. They lose their meaning under the assumption that man can be wise or be good. For the attempt to bring into being that

which can never survive the moment of the thought or deed itself is absurd. Love of wisdom and love of goodness stand in opposition to the public realm and explicitly belong to the Kingdom of Christ, but love is much more extreme in this respect. Only love must go into absolute hiding and completely avoid all outward expression.

Love, as the reverse of death which is the *modus operandi* of the sovereign power, remains therefore undetermined by any particular form of validation against a socially accepted truth, ontological or political. A second century text, the *Letter to Diognetus*, claims that Christians are able to 'look down upon the world and despise death' precisely because 'the affection they all have for each other'. And the anonymous author goes on stating that 'Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrine [...] They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers.'

Love has no country and needs no company, but the man who loves can never afford a solitary life; it is only that his living with and for others must remain without testimony and should primarily be devoid of the company of oneself. The disciple is not solitary, as he is clothed in Christ, but is however lonely, as he cannot allow himself to witness the acts of love in which he may be engaged. Works of love cannot become part of the world – the world that is subject to the sovereign power and indulges in politics – and must leave no trace. Wordlessness is inherent to all manifestations of love, as they are made possible only when the alternative sovereignty of Christ is recognized and abided by. Which makes love an essentially non-human quality. The experience of love occurs within the world itself, must be performed within it, but retains its critical nature, as it dwells away from the stage the world offers for everybody and everything to be seen and recognized. Love as an act is destructive of the public realm and a menace to political power. Because the sovereign of love is not of this world, but reigns effectively over it.