

# The Material Turn

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Many of you, I'm sure, have heard of the famous quotation from the work of William Temple that describes Christianity as "the most avowedly materialist of all the great religions."<sup>i</sup> Just think of Catholic sacramentalism: water for Baptism, bread and wine for the Eucharist, oil for the Anointing of the sick, two personal bodies for Matrimony. This description seems equally true of Judaism, our mother religion. In this paper I will try to offer more examples of this Christian materialism: Karl Rahner's theology of freedom as self-enactment over a personal lifetime, Liberation Theology's aim to change the world, and a rather new physicalist anthropology that identifies us with our bodies.

In broadly recent theology we have witnessed a series of significant "turns." In the 1960's we recall the fast appearing of English translations of the modern theology of Karl Rahner under the sign of "the turn to the subject." Theology was turning away from the ancient and medieval centrality of the category of "substance" (the thing in itself, including both the divine thing and the human thing) to the centrality of the "subject" (the personal being of self-consciousness and freedom). Modern philosophy had already made this turn from Descartes onward. Given the social dimension of personhood, we soon moved to a second turn, the socio-political turn in the theology of Johannes Metz, which complemented the first. Here we see an early "material" turn as theologians begin to focus on the economic and political structures which we have established to

support our common social life out of which our personal lives take form (the “we” always precedes the “I”). Some people were and are disturbed by these turns to our worldly (material) existence. They seemed to conflict with the traditional concern with our “interior life,” focused not on earthly concerns but on our heavenly destiny. Theologians were following philosophers in the latter’s acceptance of “historical consciousness,” which rules out any literal other-worldliness with their insistence on the fact that there is only one world, and we’re living in it. The “other world” (the world of our eschatological hope for the Kingdom of God) becomes the Future of this world. We are reminded of the prayer that Jesus taught us: “thy Kingdom come *on earth*, as it is in heaven.” Given the enormous problem of “social sin” throughout the world political theology soon became Liberation Theology - more “materialism,” and, therefore, more suspicion among those disturbed.

Let us pause for a moment to consider the meaning of “historical consciousness.” Philosophers try to discern the meaning of reality. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the great German philosopher, Hegel, claimed that reality is history. But history is what we do. We are the only animals we know of who can take time and turn it into our story. This was a marvelous philosophical breakthrough. For the ancient Greek philosophers truth was to be found in structures that do not change - history was one damn thing after another. But Hegel was a Christian. He was aware of the Biblical tradition which was the history of God with God’s people. So Hegel proclaims that **we make history**. The world we live in we have made. The next step in delineating historical consciousness was taken by Karl Marx, who agreed with Hegel but added **history makes us**. We, the makers of history were made by history. We are born into historical

circumstances made by those who have gone before us. And many people inherit bad circumstances: dehumanizing poverty, sexism, racism, etc. But these social sins have been wrought by people who made history before us. Thus, Marx proclaims: “Up till now philosophers have merely interpreted the world, but the point is to change it.”<sup>ii</sup> This charge is a clear illustration of historical consciousness. It is an obvious pointer to the primacy of *praxis*. *Praxis* is the Greek word for human **doing**, ethical and political (in Aristotle’s day Athens was still a sort of democracy, but his student, Alexander, would end that). This “praxiological turn” envisions a new relationship between theory and practice. We begin with our current doing, and this *praxis* evokes “theory” as critical reflection on *praxis*: *Praxis* ≡ theory ≡ enhanced *praxis*. A good example of this approach on the ethical level is Karl Rahner’s theology of freedom.<sup>iii</sup> St. Augustine made a distinction between free will (*liberum arbitrium*) and freedom (*libertas*): free will (weakened by original sin) is the faculty of choice between two possibilities, but freedom, empowered by the Spirit (II Cor 3:17), is simply the ability to do the good. With historical consciousness we can now name the good we have been empowered to do. Freedom becomes the ability to do oneself: in everything you do, you are doing you. The fuel of freedom is time - over a lifetime you are always doing you - you are the ultimate product of your self-doing. But in Christian faith you are not alone as you do you; there is a “co-doer,” the Spirit of God who has become the Spirit of Christ, so that the fruit of your temporal (historical) self-doing is life eternal. To answer the obvious question, how do I do me right?, the Christian disciple has *the* paradigm, Jesus Christ. For Aristotle, the *phronesis* (the “know-how” directing *praxis*) comes from the culture of Athens. For Christians, the *phronesis* comes from Christ. Indeed, we find this very word

in verbal form at the beginning of the Philippians hymn: *touto phroneite* (have that mind in you that was in Christ Jesus). Thus, Rahner is able to proclaim that eternity is the fruit of history. Ordinarily, scholars who use these Aristotelian terms leave them untranslated. St. Thomas translated *phronesis* as *prudentia* (but “prudence” has lost its aura for us), and “practice” for *praxis* tends to promote the primacy of theory with practice becoming applied theory.

Of course, Rahner’s theology of freedom as self-enactment over a lifetime articulates an ideal, more or less available for Christians as forgiven sinners. But for many people this freedom seems to be an impossible ideal. Their inherited history rules out freedom as they are fated by social sin. Some of the South American students in Rahner’s classes must have felt this way as they remembered their home situations. They spontaneously knew that their people were in need of **liberation** unto the possibility of freedom. Then came Gustavo Gutierrez with his breakthrough to the theology of liberation. What was needed was a communal *praxis* of liberation, that found its theological basis in Biblical faith. They were empowered by the Biblical stories of Yahweh, liberating the people, Israel, from slavery in Egypt, the great Exodus event, and by Jesus, the Liberator from suffering, and ultimately from death in his Resurrection. Regarding the theology of faith, the emphasis moves from the Rahnerian focus on personal faith (the *fides qua*) to the communal reception of the *fides quae*, the storied content of faith (what we believe).

Before we continue on Liberation Theology wherein grace becomes “empirical,” let us briefly review the salient moments of the classical theology of grace.<sup>iv</sup> While the Eastern (Greek) Church gave us the classical Trinitarian and Christological doctrines, it was the Western Church

that took up the theology of the Spirit in the form of a Christian Anthropology. In the O.T. Grace takes the form of the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and Israel. In the N.T. grace is presented in terms of the Kingdom of God (the Synoptics), life and light (Johannine), and *charis* grace (Pauline). The Eastern (Greek) Church gave us the beautiful theology of the deification of the Christian (God became human so that human beings might become divine). St. Augustine became the *doctor gratiae* for the entire Western Church as he spoke of the grace of the Holy Spirit enlightening the mind and enabling the will of the Christian. Indeed, Augustine was the first “philosopher of the will” as he mediated to the West the biblical understanding of the human being as **person**.<sup>v</sup> Augustine gave us the classical categories for discussing grace: operating grace (what God does in us without us, a favorite theme of Luther), cooperating grace (what God does in us with us, developed by Aquinas), and prevenient grace, the divine initiative, retrieved and universalized by Karl Rahner in his famous notion of the “supernatural existential.” These categories were used by the Council of Carthage (418) and the Council of Orange II (529) against Pelagianism and Semi-Pelagianism. Thanks to the Augustinian-Pelagian controversy, the context for the subsequent theology of grace was “hamartiological” (first discuss sin, especially original sin, and then one understands why grace is necessary for salvation. The next major moment in the Western history of the theology of grace was Scholasticism with the work of the Dominican friar, St. Thomas Aquinas. When Aquinas takes up the theology of grace, he begins with Augustine on the necessity of grace. And he repeats Augustine’s answer that grace is necessary because we are sinners. But then he gives his own answer that we need grace because we are creatures, and God wants to “elevate” us to a gifted parity with God, as God’s friends. To

Augustine's 'healing' grace Aquinas adds "elevating" grace, which is basically the same as the Greek patristic "deifying" grace. Employing Aristotelian categories, Aquinas answers the theoretical question, what *is* grace? Granted that the Holy Spirit (now called "Uncreated Grace") is the source of grace, the anthropologically focused Aquinas elaborates his notion of "created grace."

Grace is the qualitative elevation of the soul to the supernatural or divine level. It is permanent and thus he calls it "habitual grace." Just as the soul has its central powers of intellect and will, so the elevated soul has its connatural powers of faith, hope and love. Activated by these supernatural gifts, comes human activity, now an activity meritorious of life eternal. Created grace is the renovation of the core of the human being, now sanctified and no longer sinful. As time moved on, however, this holy intellectualism of Aquinas was followed by the voluntarism of Duns Scotus and the Augustinian-inspired medieval school of the Franciscans. This celebration of the will, both human and divine (a true portrayal of the personal God of the Bible<sup>vi</sup>), goes to extremes in the last of the medieval schools, known as Nominalism. This Nominalism (ideas are just "names" and there is no reality behind "universal ideas" such as humanity) with its focus on concrete individual realities was an apt philosophical atmosphere for the emergence of modern science. But it was not theologically friendly. While it claimed that all we know of God was through God's revelation, its accent on the divine will led at times to the terrible notion of an arbitrary God, a terrifying God. At other times nominalist theologians resuscitated the heretical notions of Semi-Pelagianism such as the exhortation, turn to God and then God will turn to you. Out of this strange thought-world came the Augustinian friar, Martin Luther, who rejected the

optimistic strand of Nominalism and with it the entire heritage of Scholasticism. Luther became a biblical theologian with his focus on St. Paul's teaching on Justification. He was deeply affected by the pessimistic side of Nominalism, and his fear and anxiety were not relieved by the religious observances of Augustinian daily life. His breakthrough on interpreting Paul's teaching on the justification of the sinner came as he realized that justifying grace is purely God's gift. Salvation comes from God alone, through Christ alone, by grace alone, accepted by faith alone, revealed in Scripture alone. Given his anthropological pessimism, Luther retrieved Augustine's theology of "operating grace," defined by Augustine as what God does in us without us. The Council of Trent was rather late in responding to Luther, but it did do a good job in formulating the Catholic theology of grace and justification.

### ***Liberation Theology***

One way into discussion of the theology of Liberation is again through historical consciousness. As we have seen, Rahner's theology of freedom was constructed on the first side of historical consciousness, we make history. This freedom theology focuses on one's personal history of self-making, and it presumes the requisite socio-political circumstances that permit or even promote self-making. Liberation theology, on the other hand, is a response to the second side of historical consciousness, history makes us. For many people this is bad news. Liberation theology is an umbrella term covering a variety of theologies (Latin American, African, Asian, and in the United States, African American, ethnic, and feminist theologies). All of these forms engage Christian praxis in conflict against the systemic evils of dehumanizing poverty, sexism, racism, etc. - all forms of social sin.<sup>vii</sup> The notion of social sin is in dialectical relationship to personal sin.

All social institutions are creations of human beings, all of whom are infected by sin. As such, social institutions are always ambiguous, since we are their ambiguous creators. Social sin is the dehumanizing evil we build into our social institutions (political, economic, cultural) - often blindly - sometimes consciously as with the powerful among us who profit from these tainted institutions. These institutions are quite effective in molding our consciousness of ourselves, others, and the world. They usually survive by ideological supports that make them seem right and legitimate.

While the Christian tradition over the centuries has focused on God's gracious work on human beings in their interior lives, the time has come to infuse God's grace into the institutions we create. Ideally, the Church, the Body of Christ, illustrates social grace ("behold how they love one another"), but the Church is made up of human beings who like all others are sinners. Today, historical consciousness enables us to envision the creation of more just structures to serve our common life, and the Spirit (Grace) empowers us to move towards realizing these structures. Work for justice is intrinsic to Christian faith. Grace, as salvation now, has an "upper limit" of meaning (eternal life as given by God alone) and a "lower limit" (the construction of history); despite the enormous difference between human liberation now and life eternal, there is a mysterious continuity between history (what we do, empowered by grace) and eternity (in some sense eternity is the fruit of history). While history is entirely subject to the divine promise, it is wholly entrusted to human responsibility. Eternity is decided in history. We must act as we pray: "thy will be done on *earth* as it is in heaven."

Grace empowered human freedom can create concrete institutions of social grace over



against the obvious institutions of social sin - schools, hospitals, voluntary organizations dedicated to the service of others are examples. Social grace becomes effective when it becomes empirical (material) - concrete structures of justice and love. Perhaps a good example of social grace would be the Washington Theological Union!

### **Greek and Hebrew Anthropology**

Plato was the favorite Greek philosopher of the Church Fathers in general. He seemed to be rather “spiritual.” He provided a dualistic anthropology of body and soul with accent on the latter as the core self. This soul is “spiritual” in the sense of “immaterial.” It is immortal, and it pre-existed the body. During this life the body is the prison of the soul. At death the immortal soul exits its body and returns to the realm of the “Forms,” the Platonic heaven. This body/soul dualism became the accepted anthropology of Christians with some corrections. For most the pre-existence of the soul was denied. St. Augustine (354-430) has been the most influential in these matters because of his legacy in both Catholic and Protestant theology and because of his importance in the development of Christian spirituality. Augustine’s anthropology is a modified Platonic view: a human being is an immortal (not eternal) soul, using (not imprisoned in) a mortal body. Augustine was much influenced by the Neoplatonists, who had incorporated Platonic philosophy into religious systems emphasizing the care and development of the soul as the means of salvation. Augustine bequeathed this emphasis on the soul to subsequent spiritual writers. It is by cultivating the higher faculties of the soul (and often by repressing the lower faculties of the body) that one develops the capacity for knowledge of and relation to God. For some commentators Augustine invented the “inner self” as the place for cultivating one’s relationship with God. But this

interiority was shaped by exteriority where one learns what might be called a Christian vocabulary without which there could be no recognition of a Christian spirituality. Indeed, one might have an experience of God, but without any theological language would not have *known* what the experience was.

Hebrew anthropology was not dualistic. There were no parts.<sup>viii</sup> At most it pointed to different aspects of the one whole human being, who was at once *basar* (flesh), soul (*nephesh*), and *ruach* (spirit). *Basar* (*flesh*) underscored human embodiment; *nephesh* expressed living body; and *ruach* meant open to a relationship with God. To summarize: I **am** my living body, and I'm open to a relationship with God. To understand these aspects and their translations one must remember that c.250 BCE the Hebrew bible was translated into Greek for Jews who were living outside Palestine in the Greek speaking diaspora. Over time many Jews forgot their language, and in this post Alexander the Great Hellenistic age, they adopted the Koine of the day, Greek. - *basar* became *sarx*; *nephesh* became *psyche*, and *ruach* became *pneuma*. This translation of the Hebrew bible into Greek is known as the Septuagint in honor of the seventy Jewish translators. With the further translation of the Greek into Latin *sarx* became *caro*; *psyche* became *anima*, and *pneuma* became *spiritus*. The fact that the Hebrew *aspect*, *nephesh*, was not the Greek *part*, *psyche*, a *part*, of the human being was forgotten.

Adding to this linguistic confusion was the fact that the Christian bible accepted the Old Testament in its Septuagint translation, and the New Testament was written in Greek. Granted some Hellenistic influence, we must remember that Paul and John were Jews and their anthropology remained Hebrew as they wrote of “body”, “flesh and spirit” (Paul), and “flesh”

(John).

### **Non-Reductive Physicalism**

The theologian, Nancey Murphy, is the clearest exponent of this contemporary anthropology.

My central thesis is, first, that we are our bodies - there is no additional metaphysical element such as a mind or soul or spirit. But, second, this physicalist position need not deny that we are intelligent, moral, and spiritual. We are, at our best, complex physical organisms. imbued with the legacy of thousands of years of culture, and, most importantly, blown by the Breath of God's Spirit; we are *Spirited bodies*.<sup>ix</sup>

Reductive physicalism holds that humans are physical organisms, and nothing but that, and in addition - and this is the reductive part - *everything* about us can be explained in naturalistic terms. Nonreductive physicalism, on the other hand, grants that we are physical organisms, but emphasizes that our neurobiological complexity and the history of cultural development have together resulted in our rationality, affectivity, morality, and our ability to be in a relationship with God. Admitting that physicalism and materialism are practically interchangeable terms, Murphy prefers physicalism because materialism has long been used to describe a world view that excludes the divine. Evolutionary theory and genetics have emphasized our continuity with animals, and the word, soul, was employed to express the difference between us and the animals, following Aristotle who named us linguistic (and, therefore, rational) animals. He rooted our linguisticity and rationality in our rational soul, which he defined as the distinctive "form" of the human body.

Aristotle was not a Platonic dualist. He portrayed the soul adjectively to the body which remained the noun. For him the soul was not an entity. As theologian, Nicholas Lash put it: “Think of your mind (often a synonym for soul), then, not as a ‘thing,’ stuck somewhere in your head, but as your *ability* to do the kinds of things that human beings distinctively and characteristically, do: they make plans, tell stories, dream dreams and construct elaborate systems of organization and behaviour.”<sup>x</sup> Lash goes on, inviting us to think of a pineapple and its shape. Nobody supposes that its “shape” is a different kind of thing inside or on the surface of the pineapple! “Think of the soul as the ‘shape’ of a human life: the body’s history, identity, direction and, we hope, its destiny in God.” This Aristotelian anthropology was accepted by St. Thomas Aquinas, and it became the official teaching of the Church at the Council of Vienne, France, in 1311. In his study of the anti-dualist philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein Fergus Kerr brings in the Aristotelian-Thomist conception of soul or mind as a “power or capacity to acquire intellectual or moral skills.”<sup>xi</sup> This soul is not an entity – it is having a certain set of abilities, such that, when appropriately prompted, we learn to communicate with one another, to smile, to speak to play games, and so on. These are the activities into which we are initiated, awakened, provoked, by others, by our parents, in the culture, and society, and customs in which we are brought up. In short, our “inner” psychological life begins in the open, in conversation, in community. The richness of our interior life flows from the richness of our “exterior life” with others, celebrating the Eucharist, listening to good music, having good conversations, reading good books, etc. This anthropology is rather close to Hebrew and contemporary physicalist anthropologies. And with this “official” anthropology we have already anticipated the core of physicalist anthropology. The significance of contemporary

neuroscience is this: all of the capacities once attributed to the mind or soul now appear to be (largely) functions of the brain - an even more explicit “materialist” anthropology, but an anthropology in basic continuity with our Aristotelian-Thomist tradition, which is nicely summarized by Wittgenstein’s claim that the best picture of the human soul is the human body.

### **What Might Have Been If . . .**

Nancey Murphy asks what might have been different if a physicalist sort of anthropology had predominated rather than dualism? It seems clear that much of the Christian spiritual tradition would be different. There would have been no notion of the care of the soul as the point of Christian spirituality - certainly no notion of depriving the body so that the soul might flourish! Without the Neoplatonic notion that the goal of life is to prepare the soul for its proper abode in heaven, would Christians have spent more of their time working for God’s reign on earth? And would Jesus’ teachings have been seen as a proper blueprint for that earthly society? Would the creeds, then, not have skipped from his birth to his death, leaving out his teaching and his faithful life? What *would* Christians have been doing these past 2,000 years if there were no souls to save?

### Endnotes

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i. A famous claim made by William Temple, preacher, theologian, and Archbishop of Canterbury in the 1940's.

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- ii. This exhortation is inscribed on Marx's tombstone in London, England.
- iii. Cf. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), esp. chapter IV.
- iv. For an excellent source on the history of the theology of grace cf. Stephen Duffy, *The Dynamics of Grace: Perspectives in Theological Anthropology* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993).
- v. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind/ Willing* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1977), pp. 84-110 of the second half of the one volume edition, *The Life of the Mind*.
- vi. As Paul Tillich tells us, in the encounter with the God of the Bible we first experience what person should mean, in his *Biblical Religion and the Search for Ultimate Reality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955, p. 27. For the emergence of personhood as a human possibility cf. John Cobb, *The Structure of Christian Existence* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967 and William Thompson, *Christ and Consciousness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977).
- vii. For a clear presentation on social sin from a theological/sociological perspective cf. Gregory Baum, *Religion and Alienation* (Montreal: Novalis Publishing Inc., 2006, second edition), pp. 168-93).
- viii. Helpful here is the New Testament scholar, James D.G. Dunn who distinguishes between Hebrew anthropology which discerned *aspects* of the whole human being and Platonic Greek anthropology which thought of the human being as made up of distinct *parts*: cf his *The Theology of the Apostle Paul* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, p. 54).
- ix. Nancey Murphy, *Bodies and Souls, or Spirited Bodies?* (Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. ix; cf. As well W. Brown, Nancey Murphy, & H. Newton Malony, eds., *Whatever Happened to the Soul?* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1998).
- x. Nicholas Lash, *Holiness, Speech, and Silence* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004, p. 35; cf. as well his *Easter in Ordinary* (University Press of Virginia, 1988).
- xi. Fergus Kerr, "Work on Oneself": *Wittgenstein's Philosophical Psychology* (Arlington, VA: The Institute for the Psychological Sciences Institute, 2008), pp. 105-6.