

# “In Christ There Is No East or West”: A Response to Gregory Hallam’s “A Phony War”

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Dear Editors of *The Wheel*,

As a new subscriber I congratulate you on creating a fine journal which strives to cover all aspects of faith in the public square—political (including ecclesial politics), sociological, spiritual—with openness, professionalism, and elegance. I would like to appeal to these characteristics in sharing with you my critical comments and thoughts on the essay “A Phony War” by the Rev. Gregory Hallam.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the essay, the author ventures to present “Eastern” views of the relationship between faith and science in a stark contrast to what he perceives as its “Western” (the term he uses interchangeably with “Catholic” or “Roman”) counterpart. The following quotation is representative of the author’s position with which I disagree *in fact* and *in principle*:

*In the Christian West, science only flourished after the Catholic Church’s inflexible intellectual control had been broken. That never seems to have been such a problem in the Christian East, and for good reason. The phony war between science and religion never broke out beyond Rome’s dominion—nor could it, because Roman Catholic theology was so radically different.*

I am not qualified to speak for “the West” as a whole, but I can clarify

some facts regarding the relationship to science of the historical Roman Catholic Church and its theology. I do not offer a comprehensive answer, but only bring up enough points to illustrate problems with the author’s sweeping remarks.

## The Roman Catholic Church and Science

In the Soviet Union, where I grew up, this relationship was stereotypically illustrated by the image of Giordano Bruno burning at a stake. A more careful historian may ask to what extent Bruno, a Dominican friar, was persecuted by the Inquisition specifically for his views on astronomy and not for his theology and philosophy, which alleged pantheism and denied core Catholic doctrines on the Trinity and Virgin Mary. Still, a lot has changed since the sixteenth century, and in recent times Pope John Paul II has apologized for many of the crimes of the Inquisition, including its treatment of Bruno’s predecessor in astronomy, Galileo, himself a devout Catholic.

Going back to the author’s assertion that science really only took off after Roman dominion was loosened, I have a few concerns with the underlying chronology of this assertion. When was the Catholic Church’s “inflexible intellectual control” broken? What

<sup>1</sup> *The Wheel* 4 (Winter 2016): 26–31.

historical events is he talking about? As can be readily demonstrated (just look at Wikipedia's "List of Christians in Science and Technology"), science steadily developed after Bruno's execution through the efforts of predominantly Catholic and Protestant scientists for almost two centuries until the French Revolution finally dealt a severe blow to the institution of the Catholic Church (and also cut off the head of the "father of modern chemistry," Antoine Lavoisier, another devout Catholic). In the end, the author simply fails to demonstrate a meaningful correlation between any measurable weakening of the Catholic Church and a flourishing of science.

Similar questions of chronology arise with the statement that "after the Great Schism in 1054, when the West began to lose touch with Greek Christian culture, this vital insight [of St. Gregory Palamas] was gradually lost." Did the schism mark the beginning of a disconnect between the Christian East and the West or did it happen because of the already existing disconnect? In any case, the schism predates Palamas's insight by more than three centuries.

As to the author's assertion that the conflict between science and faith did not and could not happen in "the East," it lacks clarification of where exactly "the East" was and exactly what science flourished there.

### On Catholic Theology

The author objects to the theology of so-called Neo-Thomism in which "divine intervention is a more subtly conceived additional layer of supernatural causes." Certainly such a position at some point dominated Catholic theology. It *treated* nature and grace as two

autonomous aspects of human existence to such an extent that the former could be conceived without the latter (hence the "withdrawal of God" from creation). However, the question remains whether St. Thomas himself or the Catholic theology today maintain this approach.

At first glance, the author's evaluation seems justified by a standing Catholic assertion that "grace perfects nature," as formulated by St. Thomas Aquinas, who wrote in his commentary on Boethius's *On the Trinity*: "Although man is inclined to an end by nature, yet he cannot attain that end by nature, but only by grace because of the exalted character of the end." Interpretation of this statement hinges largely on the word "nature." Intuitively, we call nature, or natural, what exists in reality. Grace then can be seen as something desirable but optional. In Thomas's technical vocabulary, however, what he called "nature" never actually existed or could exist in reality without grace. Pure nature was a mental abstraction created as a tool to make a certain argument. Those with further interest in the shifts in meaning and implication of the words "natural" and "supernatural," are encouraged to consult the groundbreaking work by Catholic theologian Henri de Lubac *Supernatural*, first published in 1946, which provides an excellent historical investigation into Thomas's thought. It is as fascinating and important for theology as the history of the shifts in meaning of the Greek words *physis* and *prosopon* and it provides ample evidence that the difference between Catholic and Orthodox views on the matter is not in essence, but in form of expression of the same faith.

In sum, the author seems to compare the perfidy of a late 19th century form

of Western European Catholicism with an idealized “Orthodoxy” that never had a historical manifestation. I object *in principle* to this polemical method, which often betrays ignorance of the “other,” creates an impression that there are “sides” to be taken in the Christian search for truth, feeds the triumphalism of one side while alienating the other, and ultimately prevents the necessary dialogue that is so well spoken for by Gayle Woloschak (in the same issue of *The Wheel*). This polemical method has no positive value and should be completely avoided. Fr. Cyril Hovorun’s contribution on the nature of Christian fundamentalism is a perfect example of how one can compare and critique concrete theological views without referring to idealized labels such as West (the side that never had it right) and East (the side that always had it right and never changed)—and still get the point across convincingly.

In conclusion, I want to challenge you as representatives of the Orthodox theological world. Often, the Orthodox mode of engagement with the “heterodox” is described in terms given by Fr.

George Florovsky: you witness to Truth to the world that is in need of it. I can assure you that the Catholic part of the world certainly appreciates this witness and, moreover, has already benefited from it greatly. What about you? Do you believe that you live out completely the vocation of the Church to preach the Gospel to every creature? Do you believe that you can fulfill this vocation by yourselves? Do you acknowledge the possibility that, in the words of the *Decree on Ecumenism* of the Vatican Council II, “the grace of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of our separated brethren can be a help to our own edification”? In contrast to Florovsky’s definition, the Silver Jubilee Symposium brochure of the St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris speaks of ecumenism as “first of all, interest in each other, the study and comprehension of the spiritual life and religious expression of other churches.” Is it not time to show this interest genuinely and to be open not only to *give* but also to *receive* witness to truth?

Peace and blessings,

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