# Conflicting Economies of Grace and Theological Anthropologies as Source of Polarization

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*Abstract*

Working with the text of T. S. Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral*, which recounts the death of Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral, this chapter discusses two very different and conflicting performances of Christianity. One, that of Becket's murderers, but also a temptation for Becket himself as portrayed in the play, is a performance based on entitlement, in which God is required to reward those who see themselves as doing God's will. Against this, and the way of performing his faith that Becket ultimately chooses, is a performance of Christianity based on a theology of liberating grace, seeing God's action as free gift that can transform life beyond martyrdom, and that can change the lives of the poor (the Chorus in Eliot's play).[1]

*Key-Words*

Theologies of Grace, Liberation, Entitlement, T. S. Eliot, Murder in the Cathedral, Thomas Becket

In this chapter I want to reflect on the different economies of grace and understandings of theological anthropology that underlie socio-political divisions in our societies. To put it simply, why or how do people who call themselves Christian end up supporting such diverse approaches to the construction of the *polis*, or, in terms of my title, what economies of grace support economic approaches that necessitate inequality, and which economies of grace support economic approaches that seek to enable people to live a life of dignity and worth? To draw on the fundamental meanings of the component parts of the word economy – what home are we seeking to construct, and according to which and whose rules?

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To reflect on economies of grace or any other kind of economy is necessarily to focus on the performance of Christianity, which I will take here as referring to particular ways of living out faith. An economy is, at least etymologically, a set of rules for a household. So what I examine here is how different rules of, and for, performing Christianity produce conflicts that are both theological and political. To put it very simply, why do some people who self-identify as Christian act in support of political positions of exclusion and denial of the rights of the other, whilst others find in their Christian faith the inspiration for inclusion and work for justice for all, regardless of race, gender, sexual preferences, and so on? I will argue that these different performances of Christianity have conflicting underlying theologies of grace.

It is also worth pointing out that what I am referring to has to do with the performative power of theology itself. Whereas the grace of God is present, whether we are aware of it or not, whether we acknowledge it or not, what we say about it, how we understand God's grace and its demands and effects, has a very real impact on the lives of Christians around the world. To take a (perhaps unsafe) example from history, we only need to consider the Reformation, where theologies of grace led to a re-calibration not only of the religious world, but of course of the political world too.

In my work,[2] I have come to use two terms for addressing the major conflicting theologies, which I identify (obviously not neutrally) as theologies of entitlement and theologies of liberation. Both these seek to explain and understand the action of God in the world and to set out the course that Christians should take to engage with this action. Positions of entitlement see grace in terms of what God is obliged to do. I have used prosperity gospel[3] as the most extreme example of this, but have also argued that it is present in other settings, including in forms of nationalism (anyone who says "our country for us", for example), anti-migrant rhetoric, neo-liberal economic policies, rewarding the rich and punishing the poor, and so on.

2 See especially Noble 2022.

3 Put simply, in the words of Cape Town Commitment, issued on behalf of the Third Lausanne Congress that took place in Cape Town in 2010, prosperity theology or prosperity gospel is defined as "the teaching that believers have a right to the blessings of health and wealth and that they can obtain these blessings through positive confession of faith and the 'sowing of seeds' through financial or material gifts." Prosperity theology's roots go back to the USA in the nineteenth-century, but it has come to be a dominant feature of many expressions of neo-Pentecostalism in Latin America and Africa. For more on prosperity gospel, see Salinas/Steuernagel 2017.

In this perspective, those who have are entitled to more, and God is more or less obliged to reward the faithfulness of those who are convinced that they have followed their side of the bargain.

On the other side are positions of liberating grace, to use Leonardo Boff's term (cf. Boff 2005). Liberating grace enables the combining of both love and freedom in service for the other. It is an acceptance of the ultimate rule or reign of God, which cannot therefore be predetermined by human beings. This does not, of course, lead to inaction, but to a constant journey of discernment towards the fullness of life in Christ. The political implications of this are several, but perhaps most importantly it suggests that the construction of the "house of peace" will be based on the law of love that offers inclusion to all "children of peace", whilst rejecting those who are anti-shalom, representatives of the anti-Kingdom, in Jon Sobrino's phrase.[4]

In what follows I want to reflect on this not as a theoretical problem, but through the use of an example. There would be various possibilities. I have looked at the conflicting approaches in Brazil of the former president Jair Bolsonaro and the current president, Lula, and the politics they represent. Neither are, of course, entirely subsumable under my categories, but could be argued to come close. Or I could have focused on Archbishop, now Saint, Oscar Romero, murdered in the chapel of the hospital of Divina Providencia in San Salvador on 24 March 1980. It is generally accepted that the order for his assassination came from the founder of the far-right ARENA party, Major Roberto D'Aubuisson, and that, in the words of the Salvadoran president, Mauricio Funes, speaking in 2010 on the thirtieth anniversary of Romero's death, those involved in the planning and execution of the killing "unfortunately acted with the protection, collaboration, or participation of state agents" (Official El Salvador apology for Oscar Romero's murder 2010). Romero's death was the result of a conflict between two very different visions of how God engaged in the world – in favour of those who considered they were entitled to power at the cost of the lives of the poor and oppressed of the country, or in favour of those very poor and oppressed who put their trust in God.

However, the story of Romero is relatively well-known, and perhaps too easy a fit for what I want to look at. So in the end I have decided for another murdered (martyred) archbishop, namely St. Thomas Becket, Archbishop

4 See, for example, Sobrino 1992: 484.

of Canterbury, murdered on 29 December 1170 in Canterbury Cathedral. Like Romero, his murder was also sanctioned by politicians. In his case, the murderers acted on the orders – or at least on how they understood the orders – of King Henry II, frustrated by Becket's conversion and subsequent failure to assent to giving the king the political power over the church that he sought. Becket's case is, though, in some ways more complex,[5] for whilst with Romero it is hard to argue against what he stood for and what he did, with Becket this is not so clear-cut. And yet, he remains someone who let his life be ruled by the liberating presence of God, against the sense of entitlement (and we can argue later whether correct or not) of the King and those who killed on his behalf.

However, rather than dealing simply with the historical situation, which is entangled in the long-running struggles between church and state in medieval Europe, I will work with the re-telling of the story in T. S. Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral*. A play is almost by definition performative, and a reading of it will offer a clearer insight into how different theologies of grace inform the two positions of entitlement and liberation. Eliot himself is not someone who would self-evidently have been on the side of liberation, and indeed the play and the historical background to the dispute between king and archbishop suggests that neither side is entirely without fault. Nevertheless, not least because of the parallels with Romero, I think that it makes an interesting case study, and allows us to examine the way in which polarization exists as the outcome of theological as well as (or perhaps better including) political stances.

## *1. T. S. Eliot's Murder in the Cathedral*

*Murder in the Cathedral* was first performed on 15th June 1935. It was written at the behest of Bishop George Bell, a former Dean of Canterbury Cathedral, to be performed in the very cathedral where Becket had been martyred (cf. Horne 2020: 275-276). The inspiration for much of the play is an eyewitness account of Becket's death, written by Edward Grim.[6] But these events and others are shaped by Eliot into something like a Greek tragedy, complete with a chorus (cf. Beckett 1979). The play, most of which

5 For a recent attempt to tell Becket's story, through the eyes of his contemporary John of Salisbury, see Nederman/Bollermann 2020.

6 On Grim and his account, see Staunton 2006: 28-37.

is written in verse, consists of two acts, with an interlude which contains Becket's last public sermon, preached on Christmas Day 1170. The first act tells of Becket's return home from exile, and the temptations that are present for him. Then the second act deals with his murder by four knights, who assume (probably rightly) that they are acting out the king's wishes. There is then a prose epilogue, in which the four knights offer a justification of their actions.

Before moving on to a somewhat more detailed analysis of how the play presents the encounter between entitled and liberating theologies of grace, it is worth reflecting on the play as a play. Apart from the Greek tragedy with its chorus, the play has also been characterised as having a "semi-liturgical form", perhaps encouraged by the setting of the Chapter House of the Cathedral, where it was first performed.[7] This latter aspect places the story within the greater Christian story not only in terms of content, and the references to martyrdom as participation in the death of Christ, but also formally. It is an act of anamnesis, and an act of glorification, not of Becket but of the God whom he sought to serve. Moreover, it adds the element of mystery, of taking part in something that we both know well and yet that is also always beyond us. This very fact is in itself part of liberating grace, a grace that both sets free and transcends, so that we can never be satisfied with the status quo.

## *2. The Chorus of Poor Women of Canterbury – Liberating Grace at Work*

I turn now to the play, to see how the polarised positions within it can be read in terms of conflicting theologies of grace. The play begins with a chorus, who describe themselves as "the poor, the poor women of Canterbury" (Eliot 1964: 11). The role of the chorus in the play is both highly significant and complex, as Carole Beckett has argued. She quotes Eliot, who said of the chorus that "[i]t mediates between the action and the audience; it intensifies the action by projecting its emotional consequences so that we as the audience see it doubly by seeing its effect on other people" (Beckett 1979: 71). At least from the perspective of liberation theology, it is also noteworthy that this mediating role is given by Eliot to the poor, those whose experience is that "King rules or barons rule; / We have suffered

7 See on this Ayers 1978: 580. See also Wilson 2016.

various oppressions", and for whom "there is no action, / But only to wait and to witness" (Eliot 1964: 13).

At this point, the chorus is perhaps more representative of something like a Marxian *Lumpenproletariat*, waiting for its Gramscian organic intellectual.[8] The women long most of all for a quiet life (peace, a word that recurs throughout the play), to be left alone. Witness is still from the outside in, there is nothing to witness to, only actions of others to contemplate. But they will come to learn over the course of the play that witness / martyrdom is an action, that they have to move from their status of "Living and partly living" (Eliot 1964: 19) to one of singing a song of praise to God for the gift of witness, in whatever way it happens.[9]

As they wait and witness, news arrives of the return of Thomas Becket to Canterbury. Priests from the cathedral gather to discuss the news, fearful of what will happen in a world where there "is but one law, to seize the power and keep it" (Eliot 1964: 14). The argument between Henry and Thomas is not a simple one, at least from a modern perspective. It concerned the complicated relationship between church and state. It is probably fair to say that from the perspective of the twenty-first century, neither side comes out very well.[10] The church's desire to have independence is no doubt reasonable enough, but the main bone of contention had to do with the rights of clergy to be tried in church courts. As estimates suggest that up to one-fifth of the population could claim rights of clergy (any church office allowed this claim to be made), any crime (up to and including murder) committed by such a person would be dealt with by the church courts, putting such people outside the law of the land. Henry wanted them, if tried by church courts, to be handed over to criminal courts for sentence, whilst Thomas argued that this would be to punish people twice for the same crime.

The hegemonical counter-claims of church and state are what Chantal Mouffe calls agonistic – a struggle between two fundamentally incompatible worldviews, each of which strives for dominance (See, for example, Mouffe 2013). For the Chorus, the question of witness always contains an implicit question about the content or the "what" that is being witnessed to. And even if we are inclined to think that Henry's arguments about the subjugation of the church to the laws of the land have some force,

8 See on Gramsci and his use in liberation theology Pagnelli 2016.
9 See Eliot 1964: 88-89, in the final chorus of the play.
10 However, on this, see a later Archbishop of Canterbury, Williams 2021.

the use of violence by those in power to maintain their power and deal with opposition remains as problematic as ever. Thomas' return, though apparently with the king's blessing, brings back into closer conflict two proud men, with neither prepared to give in to the other, and it presages no good.

As one of the priests discussing the news of the return puts it

> Despised and despising, always isolated, / Never one among them, always insecure; / His pride always feeding upon his own virtues, / Pride drawing sustenance from impartiality, / Pride drawing sustenance from generosity, / Loathing power given by temporal devolution, / Wishing subjection to God alone (Eliot 1964: 17).

He comes, say the chorus, threatening "A doom on the house, a doom on yourself, a doom on the world" (Eliot 1964: 21). Here the economy is an "economory", a house of doom, the law of which will prove to be death. And if the priests do not understand their words, Thomas does, acknowledging that even if they do not fully understand what they say, they understand better than the priests, for "They know and do not know, what it is to act or suffer. / They know and do not know, that action is suffering / And suffering is action" (Eliot 1964: 21).[11]

### *3. The Temptation to Martyrdom*

What this means is shown first in Becket's encounter with four Tempters. The first three are more or less representative of the three temptations faced by Jesus in the desert. The first temptation is to return to how things used to be, when life was uncomplicated and Thomas Becket was Chancellor of England, one of the most powerful political figures in the country. This is a relatively easy temptation to avoid, since there is no going back – golden times, if they ever existed, cannot return. The second temptation is more directly to power, to work with the king so that both can gain what they want and Thomas can once more be a man of power. And the third temptation is to take part in leading a rebellion of the English (the old Saxon families) against the Norman invaders. All these Thomas had to some extent expected, knowing his own weaknesses and his own temptations. And all of them are relatively easy for him to rebut.

11 These very words are used of Thomas by the Fourth Tempter (p. 40).

The fourth tempter is unexpected, and arguably the most complex to deal with. That is because the fourth temptation is martyrdom itself. It is the temptation, "the greatest treason", in one of the play's most famous phrases, "to do the right deed for the wrong reason" (Eliot 1964: 44). In Becket's case, the temptation is precisely to martyrdom, to suffer for his beliefs, to "[s]eek the way of martyrdom, make yourself the lowest / On earth, to be the highest in heaven" (Eliot 1964: 39). The challenge for Thomas is not to seek martyrdom, which would be one way of showing his pride, and his sense of entitlement before God, but at the same time to be prepared to follow his conscience till the end, whatever the results. If the first three temptations are those of Jesus in the desert, this is closer to that of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, coming to understand the meaning and the freedom of the path he has chosen. Martyrdom has an underlying element of entitlement as long as martyrs think that by dying they are guaranteed eternal life. Rather, the liberating action of God in the world allows people to live a life of full commitment to Christ, whatever the consequences, up to and including death. Witness is ultimately to life, not to death.

### *4. Entitlement and Liberation*

The first act of the play, then, shows us the conflict between positions of entitlement and liberation in a number of ways. The temptations are all ones of entitlement, to a certain way of life, to memories, to hopes for the future, even to political goods (England for the English and not for the other is still a common trope for some English politicians today). Not all of these things are bad in themselves, and these are the most difficult forms of entitlement to deal with. "Doing the right deed for the wrong reason" is perhaps the best summary of the problem of entitlement, which affects in political terms both the right and the left. It does, however, need to be supplemented by the temptation to do the wrong deed for the right reason, taking shortcuts to achieve an arguably laudable end.

In these circumstances the grace of God is an investment previously made that we can draw on to use, favours that we can call in. In a strict sense, it is a form of idolatry, in which the transcendent God is reduced to a lesser God, not in the sense that Jon Sobrino uses the term, to describe the kenotic presence of God (See, for example, Sobrino 1993: 158), but precisely in terms of putting God under human control, in an almost Feuerbachian sense. The temptation is that this form of grace is often apparently liberat-

ing too. Prosperity gospel works quite literally because for many people it works: they are better off, and even if they are not, they at least have a language and a rationale for why, and a way to resolve the problem. Recognising the sinful nature of the structures of late-modern neo-liberal capitalism has rarely made its victims feel more financially secure, or, more fundamentally, put food on their plates.

It is this offer of the easier path, of the instant fix, that gives positions of entitlement their power. To hear from a politician that we deserve x or y because we are from here and "they" are not (whoever "they" are in any given case, but always those who we want to characterise as other) is to hear about what we are entitled to. Of course, there need not be any religious grounding to these claims, and in many of our societies in western Europe, at least explicitly there is not, but at the same time, these positions are held by those who self-identify as Christian, because we need to uphold our "Christian" culture, and all that is "good" about our societies. I do not need to point to the irony of claims to Christian values based on acts of exclusion, oppression, hatred, injustice, denial of the humanity of the other. Generally speaking, in the mouths of politicians and some church leaders, whatever Christian values are, they do not seem worth holding.

### *5. The Christmas Sermon: Understanding Martyrdom*[12]

What Eliot would call "the still point of the turning world" (Eliot 1983: 190) is, in the (in)action of the play seen most clearly in the Interlude, the sermon preached by Becket, to the congregation in Canterbury Cathedral on 25th December 1170, and now to the audience in the theatre. In it, Becket compares the birth and death of Jesus.[13] Key here is Becket's recognition, his response to the Fourth Tempter:

> A martyrdom is always the design of God… It is never the design of man; for the true martyr is he who has become the instrument of God, who has lost his will in the will of God, and who no longer desires anything for himself, not even the glory of being a martyr (Eliot 1964: 49).

This is the radical antithesis to positions of entitlement, where the incarnation is largely irrelevant and the death of Christ on the cross is mainly a

12 On the sermon, see Horne 2020 and Fry 1978.

13 See on this de Villiers 2020. There are also echoes of the theme of another of Eliot's favourite Metaphysical poets, Donne 1608.

pledge that God will redeem, both metaphorically and literally, in crude economic terms, or in terms of physical healing. God was not restrained by death, nor will he be restrained by ill health, and those who have faith will receive their reward. But Thomas posits another way, a way of liberation that recognises grace as indeed gratuitous, as God's free action, because for us "action is suffering and suffering is action" (Eliot 1964: 21).

After the martyrdom, whilst the *Te Deum* is sung in the background, the Chorus proclaims its own words of thanksgiving and praise "For all things exist only as seen by Thee, only as known by Thee, all things exist / Only in Thy light, and Thy glory is declared even in that which denies Thee: the darkness declares the glory of light" (Eliot 1964: 86). The liberating grace of God is seen at work even in the martyrdom of Thomas, but not because this becomes in itself good. The Chorus acknowledges its own complicity in the sinfulness of the world, and evil does not become good because of unintended consequences. But the freedom that Thomas experiences is such that death simply cannot rein him in.[14]

### *6. Justifications for Entitlement*

The final aspect of the play that needs to be commented on is the prose section, which comes after the killing of Thomas and before the fairly brief concluding verse scene, involving the priests and the Chorus. Clearly the change from verse to prose and back to verse is meant to draw our attention to the importance of the section. In it, the four knights who have killed Becket come to address the audience directly – in an echo, perhaps, of the sermon. But this is a secular sermon, preaching the value of expediency and self-justification.[15]

Each of the knights reflects on what led them to act as they did, and they do so seeking to gain the support of the audience. As the Second Knight puts it, "We have been instrumental in bringing about the state of affairs that you approve" (Eliot 1964: 82). Apparently, audiences tended to respond to this interlude as a kind of comic relief, but it is not meant as such. The "state of affairs that you approve" is what might be called the elephant in the room in the play. For, whatever judgement we make of Becket's own convictions and faith, there are obvious arguments to be made that he was

14 See on this also Horne 2020: 280.

15 For more on this episode, see Wilson 2016, especially here 193-196.

on the wrong side of history, that he carried out a right deed (remaining true to what he considered to be the will of God) for the wrong reason.

The ins and outs of the case, referred to briefly above, need not detain us greatly, and yet they are not unimportant. The question that is central to the play is not how Becket dies, but why. The dividing line here between entitlement and liberation is a very thin one indeed. Certainly the temptation for him is to feel entitled both to a martyr's crown and to the honour that accompanies it. The knights for their part feel that they or their country are entitled to do what it takes – "the Archbishop had to be put out of the way" (Eliot 1964: 79) – to ensure that their vision of the world holds sway. It is, the knights are keen to argue, nothing personal, it is simply making sure that the King's desires are upheld. Listen to the words of Sir Hugh de Morville, which could be the justification for any act of entitlement on behalf of those who regard themselves as a legitimate government in just about any place over at least the last several millennia:

> The moment that Becket, at the King's instance, had been made Archbishop, he resigned the office of Chancellor, he became more priestly than the priests, he ostentatiously and offensively adopted an ascetic manner of life, he affirmed immediately that there was a higher order than that which our King, and he as the King's servant, had for so many years striven to establish and that – God knows why – the two orders were incompatible (Eliot 1964: 82).

The aims of the King – and lest we forget, it is only a century after the Norman Conquest of England, and the monarchy, as the third tempter reminded us, is still in many ways regarded as the hegemonic presence of a foreign invasion force – must hold sway over conscience, over belief, over the ostentatious and offensive ascetic lifestyle that challenges all who feel entitled to take from the world around them. "No one", de Morville goes on to say, "regrets the necessity for violence more than we do. Unhappily, there are times when violence is the only way in which social justice can be secured". And here, it is not to distant history that we should turn, but to the present in which Eliot wrote, with Mussolini and Stalin already in power for a decade and Hitler's Germany being established.

Reactions to Eliot's play have varied over the years, but it remains a powerful social commentary, and an often beautiful poetic drama. His interest was not, I presume, precisely in demonstrating the difference between the theologies underlying the positions of entitlement and liberation, and yet, I would argue, that very fact makes a reading of the play enlighten-

ing. The motivating factors in the play are several, but a case can be made for reading it from this perspective. As we have seen, most surprisingly and most challengingly, it presents the way in which even martyrdom can be sought out of a sense of entitlement. To die a martyr's death is to warrant heaven, is to warrant the subsequent praise and honour of people over the centuries. It is a most subtle temptation, to "do the right deed for the wrong reason", to seek to witness to God whilst in fact witnessing to one's own fidelity. It may be that other forms of entitlement remained – again, as mentioned above, it is rather hard to position oneself today in the argument between church and state, and it may be that in that regard Thomas could not escape his own limitations, as we cannot escape ours.

But ultimately his position comes to be liberating, not just or perhaps even primarily for him, but especially for the Chorus, for the poor women of Canterbury. In their words of praise at the end of the play, they proclaim:

> Even with the hand to the broom, the back bent in laying the fire, the knee bent in cleaning the heart, we, the scrubbers and sweepers of Canterbury, / The back bent under toil, the knee bent under sin, the hands to the face under fear, the head bent under grief, / Even in us the voices of seasons, the snuffle of winter, the song of spring, the drone of summer, the voices of beasts and birds, praise Thee (Eliot 1964: 86-87).

A liberating theology of grace is not one that offers illusion – the backs are still bent, there is still evil and fear in the world. And yet, there is also a song of praise, a recognition that in all this, amidst death and hatred and destruction and oppression, the light of God shines more powerfully, that the cold contempt and specious logic of the murderers is not the final word. And this greater God, this transcendent transformative power of the divine amidst the darkness of late December, offers liberation, which is carried out and experienced in the scrubbing and the sweeping as much as in the martyrdom.

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