

Carnivalising the Grey Friar: A Bakhtinian Survey of Eco-Spirituality in *God's Pauper*

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Abstract: The images of ecology and spirituality in Nikos Kazantzakis' *God's Pauper* form the subject of this paper. Kazantzakis's novel commemorates the mystery of St. Francis of Assisi. The novel is not just a biography. It captures the spirit of St. Francis which evinces a profound concern for nature. St. Francis' nature mysticism communicates the interconnection of all things. This presents a theological affiliation for the concerns of ecology. It is within this context of interconnectedness that Bakhtinian thought becomes relevant to ecological studies. Bakhtin's conception of the self/Other inter-relation (which does not objectify the Other but rather considers it also as the subject to the subject doing the knowing) articulates a coherent ethical code. Although Bakhtin's treatment of human-nature relations is inchoate, an attempt to extend his concepts to the realm of ecology is justified and imperative in today's world. Bathinian dialogism, using the concepts of carnival, heteroglossia, self/other etc, constitutes a *weltanschauung* that underscores a persistent interconnectedness of boundaries. This is integral to the postmodern scheme of things.

Keywords: Bakhtin, Dialogism, Carnival, St. Francis, Ecology, Eco-spirituality

This paper employs Bakhtinian dialogism to critically explore the paradigms of ecology and spirituality in Nikos Kazantzakis' *God's Pauper*. The enigma of St. Francis of Assisi, one of the most venerated saints of the Catholic Church, is celebrated by Kazantzakis in the novel. His profound admiration and love for the saint finds rhapsodic expression in the work, making it a passionate narrative infused with poetry, paradox, parables, dreams and symbols. The novel, more than being a mere biography, creatively concretises the spirit of St. Francis; which assuredly subsumes a deep regard and empathy for nature. Francis' God descends to his material limitations, appearing to him in the form of a 'beautiful night sky', 'a glass of refreshing water' or 'a consuming fire'. Extending beyond the egalitarianism of human beings, his spiritual equations proclaim parity between nature and man. So he talks and communes with nature, conversing with birds, swallows and doves as though talking with his own biological brothers and sisters. This prophetic quality of his dialogic response to nature is comparable to the approach found in ecotheology. Ecotheology combines concern with the environment and an understanding of God. It is that reflection on different facets of God experience in as much as they take their bearings from cultural concerns about the environment and man's relationship with the natural world. It

seeks to uncover the theological basis for a proper relationship between God, humanity and the cosmos. Ecotheology seeks to recover our sense of place on the earth, remind us that the earth is our common home, that the story of the earth and that of humans are one. This entails an understanding of God as pervading the whole of creation, as was conceived by people like of Francis of Assisi. Thus all life is sacred and we are called upon to be co-creators with God as part of a self-evolving universe. Eco-spirituality is a term often used synonymously with Ecotheology. Eco-Spirituality/ Ecotheology calls us to act justly, love the earth and all beings tenderly, and walk humbly with the Spirit of Life. It is centred on interrelationships and interconnections that are all-inclusive and empowering.

Dialogism and Ecology: Bakhtinian dialogism becomes relevant to eco-spirituality as the latter has interrelatedness and interconnectedness of man and natural environment as its central concern. Bakhtin's dialogism insists on otherness, heterogeneity and the relationship between the self and the other. Dialogical plurality defies a finalised completeness of separate worlds of private individuals and pulls one outside towards the Other who has not yet spoken. Bakhtin says,

Dostoevsky's novel is dialogic. It is constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other; ...Everything in the novel is structured to make dialogic opposition inescapable... It could be said that Dostoevsky offers, in artistic form, something like a sociology of consciousness... every thought senses itself to be from the very beginning a rejoinder in an unfinalized dialogue ... It lives a tense life on the borders of someone else's thought, someone else's consciousness. (The Problems 18, 32)

The presence of the other and a connection with it is implied here. Dialogic relationships are much more than mere responses in a dialogue. According to Bakhtin, "they are an almost universal phenomenon, permeating...everything that has meaning and significance" (40). This is how eco-spirituality perceives life too. It presumes that an individual can be complete only within a web of relations among other beings. In the Glossary of *The Dialogic Imagination*, dialogism is explained as an interaction: "Everything means, is understood, as a part of a greater whole – there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others" (426). This interaction is the essence of relationality in language and life. There is always an Other, a voice of the other, with which a relation or an interaction becomes imperative. Dialogism affirms the self's need for the other in order to be whole. Dialogism, therefore, provides an apt system for the expression of eco-spirituality. Though Bakhtin wrote solely about human society, his method is amenable to a context that stresses human relations with the non-human. The affinity between eco-spiritual discourse and dialogism stems from their mutual concern with relationality. Hence, Michael J.

McDowell's argument that "Bakhtin's theories may be seen as the literary equivalent of ecology, the science of relationships" (The Bakhtinian Road 372) can be appropriated in this context; as ecology permeates eco-spirituality.

Involving Nature in Carnival Categories: Bakhtin explains carnival as a performance without footlights, where everyone participates actively and everyone communes with each other through carnival acts. All hierarchical barriers are broken and everyone becomes equal here. This breaking of barriers is the essence of the carnival spirit. About this carnival sense of the world Bakhtin says:

The laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended during carnival: what is suspended first of all is hierarchical structure... that is, everything resulting from socio-hierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people.... All distance between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: free and familiar contact among people. This is a very important aspect of a carnival sense of the world (The Problems 122-123)

Although Bakhtin speaks only of the human society here, the spirit of carnival ie the elements of a carnival sense of the world could be imported to the natural world as well. It cannot be denied that nature also should inhabit the 'world' mentioned in the 'carnival sense of the world'. Therefore the breaching of barriers and the breaking of hierarchical structures would also connote the transgressing of the boundaries with the natural world and the fracturing of the anthropocentric hierarchical worldview that places human life above the non-human life. This would also entail an extension of the carnival category of 'free and familiar contact' from merely 'among people' to 'among people and nature'. Another category intimately aligned with the category of familiar contact is that of eccentricity. It reveals and expresses the latent sides of human nature, as in men like St. Francis. Certainly, this free communion with nature may at times seem quirky and eccentric to the larger society.

The Carnival Space in *God's Pauper*: The carnival square is the space where the special carnival categories, as mentioned above, function. Any place, where the carnival spirit of free and familiar contact between heterogeneous elements reigns, could become the carnival square. It is not limited by spatial factors. Bakhtin says: "Other places of action as well...can, if they become meeting- and contact-points for heterogeneous people,...take on this additional carnival-square significance..."(128). Francis in Kazantzakis' *God's Pauper* exemplifies this idea of the carnival space. The protagonist and his personal space, very clearly manifest a carnival sense of the world, realizing the carnival categories of 'free and familiar contact' (with the non-human world) and eccentricity. Francis evinces a divine foolishness when he interacts with the non-human world. He communes with nature, talking with birds, swallows and doves as though he were talking with his own siblings:

A crowd of restless swallows had gathered round him....Francis

started to speak again but the swallows began to flit here and there...drowning out his voice with their chirping....His voice was all sweetness and supplication: "My little brother swallows, I beg of you, let me have a turn to speak....fold your wings for a moment, gather quietly on all sides, along the rooftops, and listen. We are talking here about God...our common father. If you love Him, if you love me, your brother, then be still! As soon as the swallows heard this speech they folded their wings and lined up in silence around Francis (Kazantzakis 281)

This is a fine instance for Francis' eccentricity and free contact with nature. Francis' presence and proximity conjures up a carnival square, where the carnival categories work. On another occasion, through the words of Brother Jupiter, we find him with the fishes:

Then he waded into the water up to his knees and cried out in a loud voice, 'Brother fishes of sea and river, I adjure you in the name of our heavenly Father to come and hear the word of the true God!' The moment he said these words, the sea grew turbulent, the river swelled, and the fish began to assemble (350)

We see here that Francis' communications do not go unrequited. In response to his free interactions with the non-human beings, breaking the hierarchical barriers, they reciprocate dialogically. Francis' effusive love flows out to every living thing in nature:

And then, suddenly rising before us ...was a young almond tree, covered everywhere with blossoms.... "Sweet sister almond tree, our sweet little sister," said Francis spreading his arms, "you dressed yourself, donned your finery. Now we have come. How nice to see you!" (119)

Francis' consciousness does not absorb other entities into himself as mere 'objects'. He gives independent space to the 'other' as well. He addresses them as fully independent consciousnesses, in the true spirit of carnival and dialogism. It is not just the living things that attract Francis' dialogic attention and his carnival interaction. His hymn of praise reveals to us the immense appreciation he had for the inanimate elements of the world:

Be Thou Praised, *my Lord, with all Thy creatures,/ Especially Sior Brother Sun,// Be Thou Praised, my Lord, for Sister Moon and the Stars;/ .../ Be Thou Praised, my Lord, for Brother Wind/ And for air and cloud, calms and all weather Thou has granted us./ Be Thou Praised, my Lord, for Sister Water,/ .../ Be Thou Praised, my Lord, for Brother Fire// Be Thou Praised, my Lord, for our sister Mother Earth,/ Who sustains us and holds us to her breast/ And produces abundant fruits, flowers and trees* (368-369)

This acknowledgement of nature and her elements (the Other) as autonomous 'subjects', forms the cornerstone of Francis' eco-spirituality.

Conclusion: Kazantzakis, in *God's Pauper*, makes use of one of the key figures in Christian history to convey his belief that irrespective of the spiritual heights that man ascends, fundamentally, he must remain deeply rooted in nature. As, according to Christian Theology, he was made from mud and man is, in a sense, always irrevocably tied to the

earth. It is this bond that Francis evinces when he fraternizes with nature and non-human beings, and addresses them as brothers and sisters. His spiritual respect for all that lives and exists comes from this dialogic impulse towards all creation and a great love the Creator. His great sense of the presence of God in everything evokes a carnival sense of the world around him, prompting his eccentricities and free interactions with everything. He enters into a communion with the creation as an expression of his communion with God. The ecological motif, disguisedly ever present in Kazantzakis, finds full effusion in St. Francis' nature mysticism. The term ecology, understood as the interconnection of all things, is clearly a concern for Francis and hence his nature mysticism is a theological ally for those concerned with ecology. Everything reminds him and speaks to him of God. And this is the quintessence of eco-spirituality.

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