

Article

Mariology, Anthropology, Synergy and Grace: Why Is Luther So Far Apart from Cabasilas?

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Abstract: The issue of “Mariology” is one that divides the Eastern Orthodox and the Evangelical Christians. In this paper we are approaching the issue through the juxtaposition and comparison of the three Mariological sermons of Nicholas Cabasilas, on the one hand, with Martin Luther’s Commentary on the Magnificat, on the other. The study of the two works side by side will bring to surface the theological presuppositions which explain the differences between the Eastern Orthodox and the Evangelical views. It will also help us identify some key points that need further discussion and clarification but also ways to reach a point of mutual agreement and understanding.

Keywords: Cabasilas; Luther; Mariology; Magnificat; Eastern Orthodox theology



Citation: Kantartzis, Panagiotis. 2021. Mariology, Anthropology, Synergy and Grace: Why Is Luther So Far Apart from Cabasilas? *Religions* 12: 343. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12050343>

Academic Editors: Bradley Nassif and Tim Grass

Received: 18 March 2021

Accepted: 8 May 2021

Published: 13 May 2021

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1. Introduction

A point of agreement between Orthodox and Protestants is the Christological basis of the understanding of Virgin Mary as *Theotokos*. As long as “Mariology is an extension of Christology” (Ware 1997, p. 258) both have a common ground for dialogue and accord. There are, however, several other aspects related to the Orthodox understanding of the Virgin’s role in the divine economy that raise concerns and in some cases even cause for strong disagreement. One such aspect is what we may call “a synergistic anthropology” which, for many Orthodox theologians, is supported by their understanding of Mary’s designation as *Panagia*, the All-Holy one. So, Kallistos Ware (1997) comments that the Orthodox Christians honor Mary not only because she is *Theotokos*, but also because she is *Panagia*. As such, “she is the supreme example of synergy or co-operation between the purpose of the deity and human freedom” (ibid.). Staniloae explains further that “she was able, through her purity, to bring a contribution to the Incarnation of the Son of God as man” (Staniloae 2013, p. 68), as she alone actualized a power that God planted from the beginning in humans to fight against sin. The divine economy for the Incarnation therefore “is not a unilateral one” (Lossky 1974, p. 202). Mary is the “summit” of a long process of Old Testament holiness as Wisdom “was building her house” through the generations of the Old Testament righteous men (ibid.). Through her purity the Word of God will become incarnate as “alongside the incarnate divine hypostasis there is a deified human hypostasis” (ibid., p. 208). A really intriguing observation is that all three theologians we have quoted above make reference to Cabasilas’ three Mariological homilies in order to support their understanding of Mary as the supreme example of synergy between God and humans in the process of salvation.

A more detailed exposition of the theme of synergy, as it relates to the Holy Virgin, can be found in Tsirpanlis’ article on the Mariology of Nicholas Cabasilas (Tsirpanlis 1979). In his analysis, Tsirpanlis expounds Cabasilas’ Mariological homilies underlining therein the centrality of the concept of synergy. Specifically, he finds that Mary’s achievement is presented “as an optimistic message and source of power, blessing and joy to anyone who struggles for *theosis* or divinization, i.e., restoration of the original human nature and its union with God.” (ibid., p. 89). He explains further, that this teaching is part of a broader theological project that took place during the time of late Byzantine Christianity,

a project he calls “Mariocentric humanism and anthropocentric Christology” (ibid.). In a recent article Nicholaos Loudovikos makes the same point, proposing that Cabasilas’ homilies present us with what he calls “Hesychastic Mariological Humanism”, which has at its center the concept of synergy. Loudovikos quotes Cabasilas’ statement from his homily *On the Theotokos’ Birth* where he writes that Mary “helped God to show his goodness” and makes the comment, “here we see this deep understanding of synergy . . . based precisely upon the integrity of the divine image in man, an image which is precisely *freedom*.” (Loudovikos 2016, p. 65). Both Loudovikos and Tsirpanlis follow Nellas (2010, pp. 13, 34) emphatic claim that Cabasilas’ Mariology is a theological response aiming to address the rise of western humanism. Cabasilas’ work understood against the background of the autonomous anthropology formulated in the West is considered, therefore, to be the counterproposal of an alternative, theocentric humanism in which humanity is glorified by the concepts of participation in God and synergy with God. For all these theologians therefore, in Mariology, especially as it is expressed in Cabasilas, we find “an anthropological *Leitmotif*” (Lossky 1974, p. 195), an affirmation of human capacity through the notion of synergy.

Martin Luther comes onto the scene almost two centuries after Cabasilas in a context quite different to the late Byzantine period. Nevertheless, it can be argued that he operates within the same philosophical milieu as Cabasilas. For example, Luther’s first written work was a commentary on Lombard’s *Sentences*. Interestingly enough, we have good reason to believe that Cabasilas knew and used this work in his own theological reflection (Kappes 2017)¹. Notger Slenczka (2014) notes that Luther develops his anthropology against the background of classical scholastic humanism (Robert Kolb 2009, pp. 24–25, 37–39, 77, 95; Janz 2015; Oberman 1963) in much the same way as we have already seen that Cabasilas does his. Luther’s anthropological thought is systematically presented in his *Disputatio de homine* (Luther 1960, pp. 137–44). The first set of theses (theses 1–19) of this work concern insights into the meaning of humanity as provided by philosophy. In the rest of the theses (theses 20–40) he provides a theological response and definition of the meaning of being human. Two of them are of extreme importance. Thesis 24 argues that even the most beautiful and magnificent thing, namely reason, “lies under sin and in the devil’s power”. On the basis of that he argues in thesis 32 that “the human being is justified by faith”. This is the central and comprehensive definition of being human. On account of it, every human being is a sinner apart from justification (theses 33–34). Justification is not understood, therefore, as a human activity but as something that God does to humans. Luther’s anthropology therefore can be called an anthropology of grace. One of the best places to see this insight applied is in his commentary on the *Magnificat*. In it Mary is understood as “the foremost example of the grace of God” (Luther 1956, p. 323).

It is interesting therefore to study Cabasilas’ Mariological homilies and Luther’s commentary on the *Magnificat* in order to attempt to understand how these two theologians responded to the challenge of humanism, with special reference to the role of Mary, and yet they drew such different conclusions. Cabasilas presents Mary as the prime example of his anthropology of synergy, whereas Luther as the supreme example of grace. Why then is Luther so far apart from Cabasilas?

2. Cabasilas’ Mariological Homilies

In what follows we shall summarize Cabasilas’ Mariological thought as it is expressed in his three homilies: *On the (Theotokos’) Birth*, *On the Annunciation*, and *On the Dormition* (Nellas 2010). For Cabasilas, man was created and endowed with power against sin. This power, though, must be activated. He writes, “That is why it is absolutely necessary to believe that God has placed in our nature the power to deal with every sin and has commanded us to turn this power into action.” (*On the Birth*, p. 61) Tragically, humanity failed, for though the power against sinning “existed in their nature and was in everyone . . . they did not use this power, nor was there anyone who lived without sin” (pp. 63–64). This “disease” has spread to humanity and has prevailed to the extent that “everyone’s

nature is wicked" (64). Man was affected by sin to such an extent that he "was obscure (invisible, non-manifest), though he existed in myriads of human bodies" (ibid.). The Holy Virgin though, "through her love (ἔρωσ) of God, the power of her thought, the straightforwardness of her will and the greatness of her spirit" (Loudovikos, p. 63² / *On the Birth*, p. 66) drove away all sin and won a trophy such as cannot be compared to anything else. "This way, she uncovered the true human nature as it was originally created . . ." (Tsirpanlis 1979, p. 93). She was and she will be "the only human being who preserved the image of God entirely spotless and embodied the ideal humanity" (Tsirpanlis 1979, p. 93).

The key question then becomes, "how could the Virgin alone escape the common disease, being just human and without receiving anything more than other men?" (Tsirpanlis 1979). His wonder is such that Cabasilas repeats the question, "how could she do it?" (ibid.). Once again, "what, then was the cause of the Virgin's victory?" (ibid., p. 70) The answer is that she accomplished it "only by herself and with the weapons that God has given to all men for the fight of virtue" (74). Through her strife and sanctity she "attracted (God's) grace" ('καὶ τὴν χάριν ἐλκυσε') (72). Grace is explained as "power against sin" (ibid.) and is given to her as the divine response to what she had already achieved through her effort. The Holy Virgin therefore becomes God's co-worker and helper. She is the "helper of the creator" in the act of the re-creation of broken humanity (104) and as Eve was Adam's helper, so the Virgin "helped God to show his goodness" (ibid.). She was not simply an "instrument" that God used to accomplish His purpose, but His co-worker ('συνεργός') (106).

One may argue, therefore, that Cabasilas presents us with a Godward humanism, which has the concept of synergy at its center and the Holy Virgin as its prime exemplar and paradigm. Indeed, we read that through her example and achievement "she opened the door of holiness to others by being properly prepared to receive the Savior . . ." (*On the Dormition*, Nellas 2010, pp. 186–87). The Blessed Virgin "is the *par excellence* first man (in the sense of ideal and original manhood) since she alone fully realized the divine ideal in human nature" (Tsirpanlis 1979, p. 91 / *On the Birth*, p. 56).

A closer look, however, presents us with a much more complex picture.³ For example, paying closer attention to one of the passages that we have already mentioned we note that Cabasilas claims that the Holy Virgin was the only one who preserved the purity of human nature not only among those who have come in the past ('μόνη τῶν γενομένων'), but also those who will come in the future ('καὶ τῶν ἔπειτ' ἐσομένων ἀνθρώπων') (*On the Birth*, Nellas 2010, p. 68). In other words, she is not only the first but also the only one who managed to purify herself by actualizing the power given to humanity against sin. Cabasilas explains further, "besides her, from all the rest there is in none 'pure from impurity' as the prophet said" (ibid.). Mary stands, therefore, as a unique exception to what is otherwise the common inescapable human condition. This human condition is portrayed as that of a body that has been so completely destroyed by disease that there is "nothing left, so the one who wants to cure that body cannot do anything to restore health to it." (*On the Dormition*, Nellas 2010, p. 173) Therefore, in the eyes of God, "all human righteousness is, according to the Bible, more vile than any abomination, and it is called wickedness" (171). Thus, "because, we the people, after we lost because of the fall the happiness for which we were created, we have been craving it unceasingly ever since. But none of the angels or the humans had the power to offer it to us again. And we kept getting worse, so it's impossible to get back to our original state." (164)

Mary, therefore, is the only exception to that common human fate, something that makes one wonder whether her exception tells us anything at all about humanity or whether it is mostly about her and her unique role in the divine economy. In other words, the emphasis is not so much on Mary's example as on Mary's exception (*On the Birth*, Nellas 2010, p. 108). Thus it appears that what we have in these homilies is not so much anthropology but perhaps a primitive, embryonic sophiological Mariology. By this, of course, I refer to Bulgakov's sophiological Mariology (Bulgakov 2002, 2009) and I purport that it provides us with a key to understanding Cabasilas' thought. We need to clarify

that we do not imply that there is a direct link between the two but that one may discern an elective affinity⁴. In other words, in a similar way to Bulgakov's, Cabasilas views the Theotokos not as a typical human being but as one which stands in the realm of the "in-between": God and man, heaven and earth, the uncreated and the created. In a characteristic passage, Cabasilas declares that, "the Virgin not only did she heralded God, but she also manifested to humanity the enhypostasized wisdom of God (ἐνυπόστατον τοῦ Θεοῦ σοφίαν) not in signs or images but in an immanent way God himself" (*On the Dormition*, Nellas 2010, p. 190). She is human but she is also the "alight ray" (ἀφίγμενης ἀκτῖνος) (*On the Birth*, Nellas 2010, p. 88) which comes to earth. As the sun sheds its light making the beauty of the objects visible without participating in their nature, so the Virgin does with humans (*On the Dormition*, Nellas 2010, p. 174). The Blessed Virgin becomes the "heaven of heavens", an appellation reserved for God only (*On the Dormition*, Nellas 2010, p. 170). Therefore, the Holy Mother "stands in between God and humans" (*ibid.*, p. 168). She is human, but at the same time, "her exceptional virtue" makes her only on a par with God (*On the Dormition*, Nellas 2010, p. 178). Her righteousness was not "within the human realm" but not only as matter of degree for she has "altered our common nature" in such a way that made it impossible to measure the distance. As a result of her accomplishment and virtue, she stands between God and humanity (*ibid.*). She is "the comforter on our behalf in the presence of God, even before the arrival of the Comforter" (*On the Annunciation*, Nellas 2010, p. 118).

The Holy Virgin time and again is presented to us not as an example of what we should or could do ourselves but as acting "on our behalf" (ὑπέρ) and "in our place" (ἀντί) (*On the Dormition*, p. 174). She offers her righteousness "for the sake of" (ὑπέρ) the world and in this way she "justifies" everyone, which is something that Cabasilas admits that Paul said of the Savior. Jesus Christ, the Savior, is the "source" (or cause—αἰτία) of our sanctity but the Holy Virgin is the "fellow-source" (συναἰτία) (*ibid.* 206). Of course, one may wonder whether this expression and others like it are to be understood as a hyperbole in the context of a laudatory homily. Is it simply an elevated way of speaking with the intention to underline her role as the medium through which the Savior came and worked for our salvation?⁵ It is interesting to see how Cabasilas finishes the sentence quoted above; the Holy Virgin is the "fellow-source" of our sanctification as we receive "through her" (διὰ σοῦ) what Jesus has to offer but also because of what she has to contribute (τῶν σῶν). Therefore, it should not surprise us that he considers her "on par with the great victim" (that is Jesus Christ) since "she on her own destroyed the enmity and opened heaven" (*On the Birth*, p. 73).

Having contested the scholarly consensus which considers the Mariological homilies as a source of theological anthropology, we continue to affirm "the principle of synergy" (Nellas 110) as central in all three homilies. Mary's achievement is based on and is explained by the logic of synergy. The "law of divine righteousness" is that God gives his benefactions not to all but to those "who have contributed to what leads to their consummation (συντέλειαν)" (*On the Dormition*, p. 176). Fulfilling this law, Mary "attracted" God through her "immaculate life, pure walk, refusal of all evil, exercise in every virtue, having a soul purer than light, a spiritual body brighter than the sun, impeccable than the heavens and more sacred than the thrones of the cherubim. Her mind flies fearless of any height, better than the angels' wings. She is full of Divine eros which consummated any other desire of the soul". Because of that life of virtue she reached "possession of God" (Θεοῦ κατοχή) and "coition with God" (Θεοῦ συνουσία) (*On the Annunciation*, p. 116). God, in His work of redemption, takes the Virgin as "participant" (κοινωνόν) to his decision (*ibid.*, p. 126) and "helper" (βοηθόν) in His manifestation of His goodness (*On the Birth*, p. 108).

3. Luther's Commentary on the Magnificat

When we come to Luther's commentary on the *Magnificat*, we seem to be entering a different world. Before commenting on its contents, it is worth noting that, according to

the Preface, this work is dedicated to Prince John Frederick, Duke of Saxony. Luther writes addressing Frederick because “the heart of man, being by nature flesh and blood, it is of itself prone to presumption. And when, in addition, power, riches and honour come to him, these form so strong an incentive to presumption and smugness that he forgets God and does not care about his matters” (298). That is why there is no more appropriate part of the Bible than the Magnificat in order to teach and instruct Frederick the art of humility. The commentary is a phrase-by-phrase exposition of Mary’s song. It consists, in addition to the preface, of an introduction and ten sections corresponding to the ten phrases into which Luther has divided the hymn.

Especially noteworthy is the fact that Luther does not hesitate to pray to Mary before starting his work: “May the tender Mother of God herself procure wisdom, profitably and thoroughly to expound this song of hers, so that your Grace as well as we all may draw from it wholesome knowledge and a praiseworthy life, and thus come to chant and sing this Magnificat eternally in heaven. To this may God help us. Amen.”

For Luther, Mary’s song is a doxology to the grace of God (Wright 1989, pp. 164–66). At its heart there is the question: “how should a creature deserve to become the Mother of God?” (327) Of course, for Luther this question is rhetorical. No creature can ever deserve such an honor. Reading carefully the biblical text and staying close to the witness of the Holy Virgin herself, Luther observes that “Mary freely ascribes all to God’s grace, not to her merit” (327). Though he believes that Mary was without sin (Wright 1989, pp. 174–76), he insists that God’s grace was bestowed in her as a gift and not as a reward. Mary was suited to become the Mother of our Lord by being a woman, virgin, from the tribe of Judah and ready to accept the angelic message. Suitability, however, does not entail worthiness or merit (136). The key word that sets the tone of the entire hymn is the word “despite”.

Already at the very beginning of the introduction of his commentary he writes, “when the Holy Virgin, then, experienced what great things God was working in her, *despite* her insignificance, lowliness, poverty, and inferiority, the Holy Spirit taught her this deep insight and wisdom, that God is the kind of Lord who does nothing but exalt those of low degree and puts down the mighty to break whatever is whole and make whole whatever is broken” (299). Her basic virtue was humbleness. The word ‘ταπεινωσιν’ (humilitas) in the text should not be rendered as “humility”, a virtue that Mary could attain and could therefore boast about. “In His sight we ought to boast only of His pure grace and goodness, which He bestows upon us, unworthy ones” (313). On the contrary, when Mary refers to her “humbleness”, it is as if she says: “God has regarded me, a poor, despised and lowly maiden, though He might have found a rich, renowned, noble and mighty queen, the daughter of princes and great lords. He might have found the daughter of Annas or of Caiaphas, who held the highest position in the land. But He let His pure and gracious eyes light on me, and used so poor and despised a maiden, in order that no one might glory in His presence, as though he were worthy of this, and that I must acknowledge it all to be pure grace and goodness and no at all my merit or worthiness” (314).

What attracts God’s eyes is not her stature but the “depths” of her human existence. God acts as in creation, *ex nihilo*. He does not turn his eyes to the heights but to the depths of human existence. Being the Most High, He has nowhere else to look but inside Himself and lower than Him. We need to clarify here two things. The first thing is that by emphasizing “humility”, Luther does not promote an anthropology of misery. He emphasizes that the Virgin Mary boasts neither about her worthiness, nor about her unworthiness. That is, what we have here is not a masochistic, self-loathing attitude. The opposite of a man-centered humanism is not misanthropy. Luther’s point in his analysis is that what ultimately matters is the divine initiative; it is not what Mary is or does but God’s decision to look upon her (314).

What explains Luther’s motive emphasizing the divine “despite” and Mary’s “unworthiness” is his steady commitment not to “overshadow or diminish even in the slightest the glory of God” (327). Commenting on the first phrase of the Magnificat, he notes that the Virgin Mary’s last word is “God”. She does not say “my soul magnifies itself” nor

“exalt me”. She does not desire to be honored. She magnifies only God (*Soli Deo Gloria*) and gives all glory to Him (308). This again is for the benefit of the believer. Because the experience of God’s mercy to those who are poor, despised, abandoned and insignificant makes their hearts to “overflow with gladness and go leaping and dancing for the great pleasure it has found in God” (300). Emphasizing the Virgin Mary’s “humility” does not mean that Luther underestimates her. His commentary is full of respect and affection for her, in ways that perhaps he could teach us Protestants to overcome our awkwardness in front of her. It is worth noting the ways in which he addresses or makes reference to her. The two most common are “Maria”, as might be expected, but also “Mother of God”. He also calls her “Blessed Mother of God”, “Sweet Mother of God”, “Blessed Virgin Mary”, “Holy Virgin”, “Sweet Mother of Christ”, “Pure and Righteous Virgin” etc. In two parts of his work, in fact, he teaches us the right way to give her honor providing us with two “salutations” towards her. Here is one of them.

“O Blessed Virgin, Mother of God, what great comfort God has shown us in you, by so graciously regarding your unworthiness and low estate. This encourages us to believe that henceforth He will not despise us poor and lowly ones, but graciously regard us also, according to your example” (323)

Luther’s analysis has a definite pastoral dimension. The Holy Virgin is “the foremost example of the grace of God” (323) that could teach us and help us to understand the ways of God. She is different from us, but at the same time she is just like us; in order to give us confidence (323). Luther comments that her hymn contains the wonderful works of God and serves a threefold purpose as it is given “for the strengthening of our faith, for the comforting of all those of low degree, and for the terrifying of all the mighty ones of earth.” We are to let the hymn serve this threefold purpose; for she sang it not for herself alone, but for us all, that we should sing it after her” (306).

It is a comforting, optimistic anthropology of divine grace.

4. Why, Then, Is Luther So Far Apart from Cabasilas?

There are many ways by which we could have tried to explain the difference of perspective between Cabasilas and Luther. We will focus on the one that we believe is central. In short, Cabasilas’ Mariology constitutes a theology of glory, while Luther’s a theology of the cross. An attempt to describe in detail what we mean by the terms theology of glory and theology of the cross is beyond the scope and limits of our study. There are, however, several points to make that will help us grasp the main thrust of this important aspect in Luther’s theology. First of all, it is important to emphasize that according to almost all of Luther’s interpreters, his theology of the cross is not simply about the content of his theology, but is also about the way he does theology, his theological method and perspective. Before we articulate it, it will be useful to make reference to three of Luther’s theses from his famous *Heidelberg Disputation* (Luther 1957, p. 40) which best encapsulate his understanding of his theology of the cross:

Thesis 19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened (Rom. 1:20).

Thesis 20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

Thesis 21. A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls things what they actually are.

The error of the theologians of glory is that they do not approach reality through the lens of God’s revelation. They think according to the logic of the world, according to what seems apparent and obvious. They think that “the way the world appears to be is actually an accurate account of who God is” (Trueman 2015, p. 62). On the other hand, the theologian of the cross focuses on the revelation of God, particularly at the point He chose to reveal Himself, namely on the Cross. That does not mean that he reduces God’s revelation only to that single event, but that he makes the cross the “fundamental criterion

for the theology of the gospel" (ibid., p. 63). Thus, for the theologian of the cross, paradox is at the heart of the theological method. In contrast to this, for the theologian of glory, reciprocity is the focal point. Trueman comments, "the world around us operates on the basis of reciprocity: those who do good are the ones who consequently receive a reward; those who do evil receive punishment" (ibid., p. 62). The theologian of glory assumes that the same principles apply in the way God deals with humanity.

With that in mind, we come once again to examine Cabasilas' Mariology focusing now on the concept of synergy. Building his Mariological argument, Cabasilas starts with the saints of the Old Testament emphasizing their merit and then talks about Abraham who "as a reward of his piety became the patriarch of a nation . . . ". The same goes for those who will bring the Virgin Mary to life. The logic that governs Cabasilas' thinking is that "God gave the greatest of all the gifts to humanity through those who were in every way the best." On account of that principle, addressing the parents of the Virgin Mary, he says, "the fact that you were able to accomplish such great things before God and were honoured because of them with such admirable honour is a glorious proof that you are more beloved of all men to God. The crown proves and reveals the achievement and this is because God 'measures all things with fair measures'" (*On the Birth*, pp. 46–50). According to this logic, "grace" is defined as the "goal" (τέλος) of the Law (ibid., p. 50) and the "fulfilment" (πλήρωμα) of the law" (52). They received grace because they were "strict observers of the law" (53). Grace is not a gift but a fruit or an achievement. They have built the house so that grace can then place the roof at the top (ibid. p. 52). God's call to synergy with Him comes as a reward for our achievement to live a life of purity (*On the Birth*, p. 46). Therefore, the Holy Virgin "attracts" God and becomes His "helper" (*On the Birth*, p. 108) because she has first lived an "immaculate life" (*On the Annunciation*, p. 116). Therefore, "through her beauty she showed the beauty of the common human nature; and thus she attracted the dispassionate God and he became man because of her" (ibid. p. 118). It is important to underline the word "because", which reveals the logic of reciprocity. God's righteousness is understood in terms of fairness, that is for God to render to everyone according to his or her deeds (*On the Annunciation*, p. 146). On that account, when Mary's achievement is placed on the "scale" of God's righteousness, it is only fair (δίκαιον ἦν) for Him to make her the Mother of God (ibid.). That is why, when Gabriel brings the good news to Mary, there is no surprise, no wonder on her part, "her mind was not disturbed nor did she consider that she was not worthy of this work" (*On the Annunciation*, p. 132). This is because "she was aware that there was nothing in her soul incompatible with the mystery and that her life was such that she couldn't mention any human weakness of hers" (ibid., p. 130). She loved God with such intensity that "it would be completely unlikely that God would not consider it His duty to give her a proportionate (ἀντίρροπον) reward to become her son" (ibid., p. 148).

This logic of merit, reciprocity and proportionality lies at the heart of Cabasilas' concept of synergy and is, according to Luther, also at the heart of the theology of glory. For the theologian of the cross, the key work is not the word "because" but "despite". The key question is not one of admiration: "how could the Virgin alone escape the common disease, being just human and without receiving anything more than other men?" (Tsirpanlis 1979, p. 93/*On the Birth*, p. 68) but of humility "how should a creature deserve to become the Mother of God?" (327)

5. Bridging the Gap

As we bring our study to a close, it is worth making four final remarks which may help, so to say, to bridge the gap between Cabasilas and Luther, or more generally between the Eastern Orthodox and the Evangelical positions on Mary.

5.1. The Question of Synergy as It Relates to Mariology Remains a Stumbling Block for Evangelicals

It is one of most troubling issues, even if we may not share Barth's vehement sentiments when he claims that "in the doctrine and worship of Mary there is disclosed the one

heresy of the Roman Catholic Church which explains all the rest” and he explains that “the ‘mother of God’ or Roman Catholic Marian dogma is quite simply the principle, type and essence of the human creature co-operating servantlike in its own redemption on the basis of prevenient grace, and to that extent the principle type and essence of the Church” (Barth 1978, p. 143).⁶ Interestingly enough a good corrective to this emphasis on synergy may be found in Cabasilas’ other work, *On the Life of Christ*. It is beyond the scope of our study but it will be interesting to note that Nellas, who otherwise is an enthusiastic admirer of the theology of synergy⁷, admits that in *On the Life of Christ*, Cabasilas is “being faithful to the Biblical tradition he relativizes without a doubt every human endeavour and strife for the achievement of righteousness and he rejects every autonomous human endeavour which is ‘our own’”. (Nellas 1998, p. 110).

5.2. *In Order to Locate the Question of Synergy in Its Proper Theological Context We Need to Move beyond the Juxtaposition of the Theologies of Glory and of the Cross*

I believe that at the root of this juxtaposition there is a contrast between two different understandings of the economy of salvation: one that has at its center the Incarnation (Eastern Orthodox) and another that has at its center the Cross (Protestant). One may argue that the Orthodox emphasis on the Holy Virgin is due to the importance they place on the doctrine of the Incarnation. Perhaps, finding a way to develop a more robust theology of the Incarnation without moving away from a strong affirmation of the centrality of the Cross may help us Evangelicals to more appreciate Mary’s role in the mystery of the divine economy.

5.3. *A Helpful Question to Raise Is Whether We Can Find a Point of Equilibrium between Cabasilas and Luther*

On the one hand, we have Cabasilas with his elevated view of Mary as God’s co-worker, helper and even co-redemptrix. On the other hand, Luther, trying to stress God’s grace, focuses on Mary’s unworthiness, limiting her role simply to the fact that she was a woman, a virgin, of the tribe of Judah and ready to believe the angelic message. She is suitable only in a sense that was equally true of the wooden cross. Of course, both Luther and Calvin rejected the extremes of the Radical Protestants, who saw Mary simply as a channel through which Christ flowed (Wright 1989, pp. 168–69). We believe that there is a useful distinction to make between thinking of Mary as either “praiseworthy” or “meritorious”. As Evangelicals, we affirm the former but not the latter. Luther’s approach shows some ambivalence because on the one hand he emphasizes Mary’s low estate and nothingness but on the other, he shows affection and respect to her. He says, “Hence men have crowded all her glory into a single word, calling her the Mother of God” (Luther 1956, p. 326).

5.4. *The More We Couple Mariology to Christology, the More We May Find Common Ground, Evangelicals and Orthodox, in Honouring the Blessed Theotokos*

As we have noted already, part of the explanation for the honour ascribed to Mary in the Orthodox tradition in general and in Cabasilas in particular, has a Christological grounding. It is the mystery and glory of the Incarnation that makes Mary’s role unique and praiseworthy. Keeping the focus on Christ, for both Orthodox Christians and Evangelicals, may therefore be the key to finding a common ground in our understanding and honoring of Mary.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Cabasilas' theology of the "sacraments" show concrete evidence of his knowledge of Lombard's *Sentences* (Kappes 2017, pp. 488–91).
- ² When the name of an author follows a quotation, it is an indication that we follow his or her translation of the passage from Cabasilas' homily. Otherwise, all translations from the Greek text are ours.
- ³ In addition to the issue which will give attention to in our analysis, we need to make reference to the open debate around the question of whether Cabasilas espoused the dogma of the Immaculate Conception or not. Typically, Roman Catholic scholars argue that the homilies give us evidence that Cabasilas accepted that dogma whereas Eastern Orthodox Christians deny it. Our opinion is there is an ambivalence and indecision on Cabasilas on this matter. For more, see (Tsirpanlis 1979; Loudovikos 2016).
- ⁴ We use the term *elective affinity* in the same way that Max Weber used it in his analysis of the relationship between Protestantism and Capitalism (McKinnon 2010). Andrew Louth commenting on Bulgakov's Mariology writes, "For Bulgakov the association of Sophiology and Mariology is bound up with his concern for what one might call the 'in between', the region between God and the created cosmos. Rather than keeping them radically apart, as the Christian doctrine of creation ex nihilo can be conceived as entailing, Bulgakov is concerned to explore the frontier between the uncreated God and the created cosmos, a frontier conceived of equally in terms of Sophia and of the Mother of God." (Louth 2019, p. 297) Here is how Bulgakov understands the role of the Virgin: "In her is realized the idea of Divine Wisdom in the creation of the world, she is Divine Wisdom in the created world. It is in her that Divine Wisdom is justified, and thus the veneration of the Virgin blends with that of the Holy Wisdom. In the Virgin there are united Holy Wisdom and the Wisdom of the created world, the Holy Spirit and the human hypostasis. Her body is completely spiritual and transfigured. She is the justification, the end and the meaning of creation. She is, in this sense, the glory of the world. In her God is already 'all in all'" (Bulgakov 1935, p. 139).
- ⁵ Meyendorff warns us that in the context of the poetical, emotional, or rhetorical exaggerations characteristic of Byzantine liturgical Mariology one needs to be careful how to understand various concepts related to the role and person of the Holy Virgin (Meyendorff 1974, p. 148).
- ⁶ Of course one may note that Barth's criticism obviously refers to the Roman Catholic Marian dogma. Nevertheless, his criticism on the theme of synergy applies just as well to the Eastern Orthodox Mariology.
- ⁷ An interesting question to explore is the relationship between the concept of "free will" and "synergy". Whether, in other words, the two refer to the same or a different reality. An interesting historical note here is the discussion concerning Melanchthon's latter views on the origins of faith. For more, see (Graybill 2010).

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