Interview w. Dr. Joseph P. Farrell

Magnum Opus:

God, History, & Dialectic

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How long did it take you to research and write this book. Can you elaborate on the kinds of research you did, and where, when, etc.?

The book was written in about 2 weeks, due to the time constraints I was under trying to satisfy my students in the course of the same name that I taught. As for researching it, it is the fruit of many years of patristic study. It would be difficult for me to say, since I started reading the fathers way back in college. So I suppose it represents about 20 years of research and thought.

Why did you make the Apparatus the fourth volume (and yet it's labeled volume 1 in the old print edition - but it's always really been volume 4). We've heard tell of a scholar who did the same thing, releasing his apparatus only after the main work was released. Can you explain and relate that account?

The scholar's name was, I believe, the famous mediaevalist Kantorowitz, but don't cite me on this, as it may have been a well-known colleague of his. The episode is mentioned, however, in Norman Cantor's *Inventing the Middle Ages*, which is a book, not about the Western Middle Ages, but about those who wrote about them, and became well-known scholars of the subject. In any case, this scholar - whom I believe was Kantorowitz, but again, my memory may be mistaken, it being so many years out now since I've thought about these subjects - wrote a book and published it in Germany, in which he came to certain radical conclusions for the day. He published it without footnotes or references of any kind, and naturally was savaged by academics in reviews. Knowing ahead of time that their reaction would be predictably negative, he had of course prepared the volume of massive footnotes and annotations ahead of time, so that no sooner had the academic critiques appeared, the apparatus was released, and his critics literally buried in a broadside of footnotes.

Many of us have read your earlier works - your translation of St. Photius, to which the introduction is now a classic, and your St. Maximus works. If you had to compare what you're doing in those books with what you're doing in the four volumes of GHD, what would you say?

Essentially I'm doing the same thing. I'm examining Augustinism from the patristic dogmatic tradition of Orthodoxy and spelling out its implications. The major difference is that the previous works can be considered a kind of broad overview or survey of those implications. In GHD I attempt to spell out some of them much more explicitly. I certainly would not, however, claim that I have covered everything nor been exhaustive. For example, I do not cover the Scotists and so on, and their version of mediaeval scholasticism, and the philosophical section, which I intended to be much longer, had to be pared down considerably. I had also intended to cover some schools of modern
business management theory and philosophy to exhibit their reliance on the theological cultural paradigm of Augustinism - which I had done in other courses at the University of Oklahoma - but time did not permit this either. Time in the original course that I taught simply didn't permit any of this, and the book is really, when all is said and done, a book compiled from those lectures.

There are lots of treatments of Westernization, Latinism, juridical theology, Augustinism, etc. out there. How would you say GHD differs from what's already been popularly done in the field?

One difference is that it seeks a large overview while not neglecting the details. And obviously, the most significant difference is the fact that it is written from the Orthodox patristic dogmatic perspective as a point of departure for analysis.

You draw somewhat on Fr. John Romanides' work. Can you give us some understanding of your evaluation of his primary theses, and what role these played in God, History, & Dialectic?

I had come to very similar conclusions as Fr. Romanides through my own research, and thus was rather pleased when I found another researcher who thought more or less along the same lines. Specifically, Romanides and I both focus on the ninth century as being the turning point, for this century is where the two theological cultures clash openly and for the first time. Romanides' thesis is basically the same as mine, namely, that by dint of its Augustinized theological culture, the Christian West cannot interpret the details of history of that century - the coronation of Charlemagne, the rupture between Nicholas and Photius, the subsequent reconciliation of Pope John VIII and Photius, with anything like historiographical consistency, and that this lack of consistency is the product of deeply rooted theological perspectives.

You once wrote a detailed work on Gnosticism which has yet to be published. What is it about Gnosticism that isn’t already defeated and dead? Isn't Gnosticism the problem of the first centuries of the Church, and basically a body of doctrines no one would believe anymore?

In that work my approach toward Gnosticism was essentially the same as that presented in GHD, namely, that Gnosticism is not so much a grouping of various systems of doctrines as it is a set of strategies and tactics of institutional subversion, and in that sense, was breathed new life in the Augustinian synthesis, where one finds, as logical entailments and implications of that synthesis, those very same strategies and tactics revived to explain and justify the synthesis itself. So in that sense, Gnosticism is alive and well, and easily recognizable once one knows the strategies and tactics it employs. The bad news is that it's alive and well and flourishing in many seminaries, academics, and departments of literary criticism.

GHD seems to be a meta-history or meta-analysis, or one of the last great comprehensive histories - there's a term for those. Why do you think it's so hard to get those published anymore - is the world no longer able to do that kind of thinking, or is it afraid to?

"Comprehensive" is a dangerous term, because of course I do not aim at exhaustiveness in GHD, but merely to show that the Augustinian synthesis had and has implications that continue to spill over and perpetuate themselves in the wider culture of the West. That
caveat on the record, it is true that I fully intended to write an analysis of history "in the grand scale". As for why it is difficult to get such works published, I think that too is a legacy of that synthesis. The reason I say that is because, if one looks at the disputes in the Christian West in the ninth century - the disputes concerning the Eucharist, or predestination and free will, and so on - these are all taking place in piecemeal fragmentary fashion. The participants in those disparate disputes - oftentimes the same individuals, such as Ratramnus of Corbie - never make the connection between their disputes. They never envision that their problems in particular areas of theology are the result of much deeper assumptions, and that the disputes themselves are therefore not unrelated, but, on the contrary, deeply and intimately connected. The Augustinian synthesis fractured the western religious mind by cutting it off from tradition. And no institution in the modern West is more cut off from the grand academic tradition of old than is the academy. So, in short, as far as I'm concerning, it's another cultural legacy of that synthesis at its deepest level.

It is rumoured that you once debated for several days straight, when you were at Oxford - in other words, you never left the debate hall over the course of several days. What can you tell us about this rumour - can you fill in the blanks?

Yes that's true. The debate took place in, and was sponsored by, the Oxford Union Society, the famous debating society there. It was cosponsored by the Heineken and Guinness Corporations for Ethiopian famine relief. By the fifth day the chamber had thinned out considerably, but there were still a few diehards bulling their way through, and slogging it out with each other at the dispatch boxes. The debate was not "about" anything mind you, but more of an ongoing "roast" of each other's positions using parliamentary rules...all very "British" and "civilized". After eight days of this, we had achieved our objective, made it into the Guinness book of World Records, and were utterly exhausted. The Union Society gave little certificates to the more vocal participants, part of which thanked the participants for their efforts and thanking them for exhibiting "occasional sobriety". It was like a very raucous House of Commons at times, when the chamber was more full. It's untrue, however, that we never left the hall. We had to, in order to eat or take care of "other matters". The point of the debate was to keep it going no matter what, because Heineken and Guinness sent corporate representatives to sit in the chamber at all times to ensure that the debate kept going. If one went into the library or even went home to sleep occasionally, one would most likely get a call from someone requesting you return in order to keep the debate going. That happened to me. After two days I went home to sleep, and after only about 4 hours of sleep, was called to return to the chamber to keep it going. So for the next five days I more or less lived, ate, and slept at the Union Society.

We're often asked to sum up in maybe a paragraph or two what GHD is "about". It's hard to sum it up. Can you? Or at least give a potential reader an idea of what to expect?

God, History, and Dialectic is about exactly what the subtitle says: The Theological Foundations of the Two Europes and Their Cultural Consequences. That is to say, my aim was not only to exhibit the Augustinian synthesis as but a recasting of the older Hellenization of Origen et al, but also to show its "tightness" and to explore a range of consequences that this synthesis, employing all the standard tactics and techniques of
Gnosticism, had in the wider culture, in the formulation of law, of biblical criticism, of the rise of dialectical views of history in the hands of a Joachim of Fiore, a Hegel, and so on. It is more than a review of my earlier works on Augustinism, it is a considerably expanded essay on the logical entailments and implications of that system.