



Moral Theology in a Digital Age:
Retrieving the Past for the Future

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- *What is my responsibility as a moral theologian in a digital age?*
- *How do I facilitate a mutual self-mediation between the “reading” of digital culture and the church’s tradition of moral reasoning?*
- *How does this reflection assist the ministry of the church, not only ad intra but also in the world?*

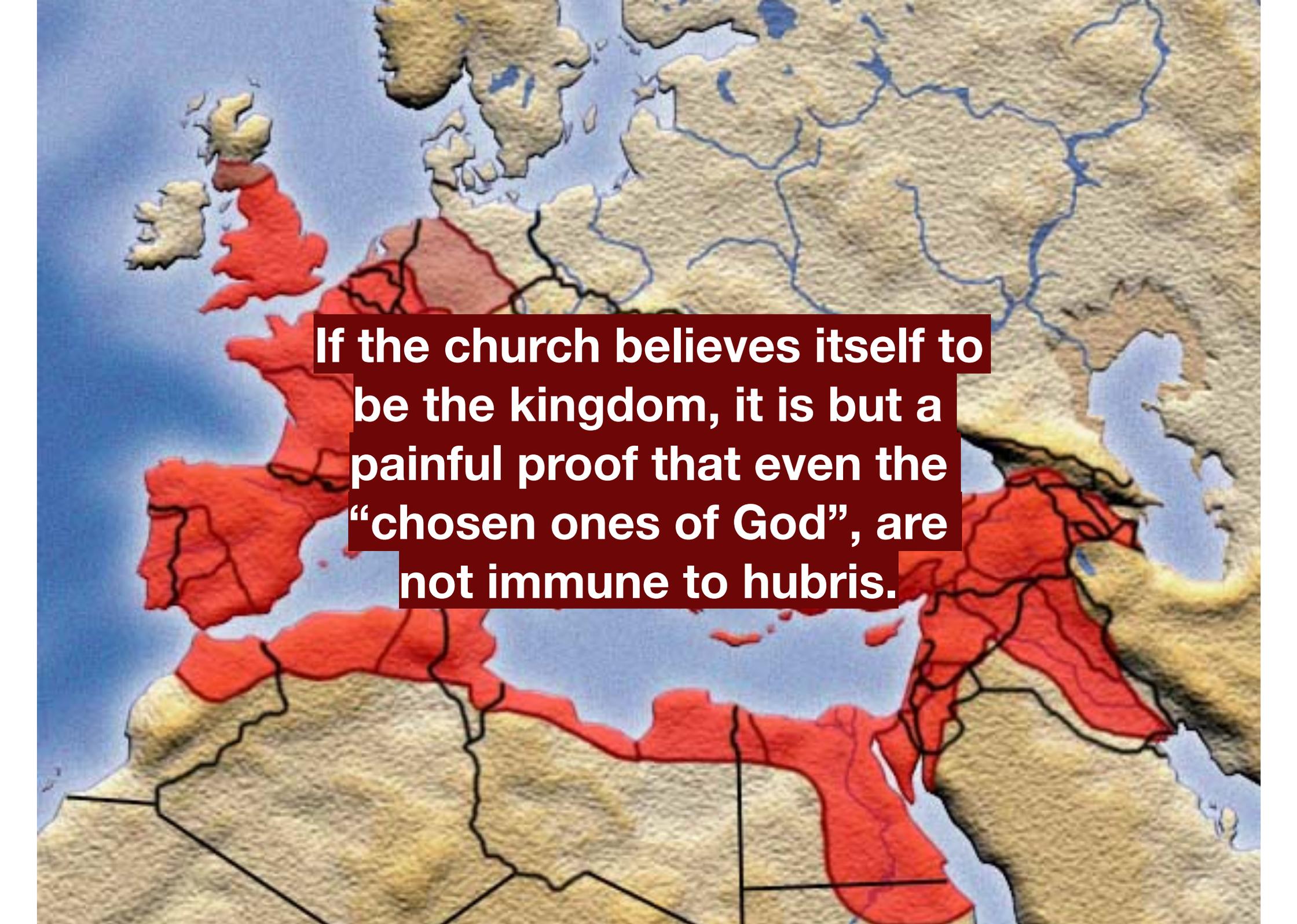


“The cradle of the Church was Greco-Roman literacy, and this was **providentially designed, not humanly planned.** ...

But now we have suddenly a way of propagating information and knowledge without literacy. I would say it is a wide-open question whether the Church has any future at all as a Greco-Roman institution. ...

This cultural heritage is expendable.”

–The Medium and the Light, 58-59



If the church believes itself to be the kingdom, it is but a painful proof that even the “chosen ones of God”, are not immune to hubris.

“How the church deals with its weakness — let alone the contradiction in the world — is what moral theology reflects about.

To put in words this reality, moral theology has appropriated the classical language of Greek philosophers and Roman Jurists, perfected by the Gospel: the good life, virtue, nature, law, but also grace, beatitude and love.

Classical philosophy allowed for a coherent reflection and therefore a systematic understanding of the *paideia* of Christ.”

Challenges?

- *What happens when the cultural ground of literacy itself is obsolesced?*
- *What is expendable of our moral discourse?*
- *What remains profoundly pertinent and needs to be renewed? How can it be renewed?*

Way of proceeding

- **Wine in wineskins:** the artifact “moral theology” as received
- **Wine:** “moral theology” as essential to the church
- **Wineskins:** out with the old, in with the new; a renewed “moral theology”?



Wine in wineskins

“Moral theology” as received

But no one puts a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch pulls away from the garment, and a worse tear results. Nor do people put new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the wineskins burst, and the wine pours out and the wineskins are ruined; but they put **New Wine** into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved.

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Bible verses

and Jesus parables

for all His disciples around the world

Is “moral theology” a product of a very particular time, culture and church?

Or is “moral theology” an ecclesial reflection or praxis for all time and cultures, **for the universal Church?**

The medium is (also) the message

- the **particular form** a ministry takes has profound consequences on the community
 - at every point in time, in every culture, a ministry could take different forms that in themselves can be judged as **more or less conducive to fulfill the demands of the gospel**
- *Are the diverse methods of moral theology merely the effect of changing times?*
 - *or are they the conscious appropriation by the church to minister more effectively at particular times?*

Wine

The constant of “moral theology”



“The matter of moral theology is none other than human life as ordered to God.

While every man and woman is created in ‘the image of God’ becoming in Christ’s likeness is a lifetime transformation. ...

Man and woman must **consciously and freely will** to receive God’s gift of divinization.”



The two aspects of moral theology

- The moral and spiritual development of the agent as **growth in virtue**
- The appropriateness and fittingness in particular situations of **specific acts**

The “names” given to the sacrament of God’s mercy

- **“penance”** (tariff penance) — an act of spiritual discipline... but also of suffering “punishment” for transgressions
- **“confession”** — “integral confession” as an act of the penitent in the tribunal of the Tridentine “confessional”
- **“reconciliation”** — retrieves the theological meaning of what Christ has done for us: reconcile us to the Father

“The **judge** is righteous even when he
condemns.

But the **doctor** cannot be a true healer while
the patient remains mortally wounded.”

In with the new and
out with the old

Renewing “moral theology”



Two imaginaries



Suggestions

- **VIRTUE** as the true aim of Christian moral pedagogy;
- **VIGILANCE** as we continue to seek the truth about human freedom and action;
- **IN TUNE** with the pain and suffering of the people of God;
- Discern the proper **COMMUNICATIVE ROLE** of moral theologians in the church.

Re-appropriating the freedom to become virtuous

The predicament we inherited: Disconnection of freedom from truth

- no shared narrative of what constitutes the human good and human flourishing
- the exercise of moral reasoning has been weakened: no social basis on which to build a principle-based morality
- “*A Secular Age*”: the eclipse of natural ends, where mere choices replace the freedom to grow

The predicament we are facing: Disconnection from our power and responsibility

- the human has changed:
 - greater power through technology, but further distance from exercise of personal power because of technology
- evil forces take control of anonymous power when we refuse to take responsibility

On being vigilant to discern the truth and act wisely

A reappropriation of traditional foundations for the moral life

- **Prudence**: relies on paying attention, and therefore now applied more widely... as wide as the extent of our power
- **“Measure”** for what is good and fitting; a measure for authentic integral flourishing: the recovery of anthropology

“We can infer important conclusions about a civilization when we know that its debates and controversies occur at outpost positions rather than within the citadel itself. **If these occur at a very elementary level, we suspect that the culture has not defined itself, or that it is decayed and threatened with dissolution.**”

–The Ethics of Rhetoric, 171

*On being attuned to the suffering
of the people of God*

Beyond compassion

- the “dominant technocratic paradigm” reduces suffering to problems that can be fixed
- in the wisdom of the Gospel, suffering is what we bear, not for its own sake, but **as reflecting the existential reality of our dependence on God**
- the recovery of an imaginary of healing, is a recovery of **the truth of God’s mercy**

“On itself, mercy takes precedence of other virtues, for it belongs to mercy to be bountiful to others, and, what is more, to succor others in their wants, **which pertains chiefly to one who stands above**. Hence mercy is accounted as being **proper to God**: and therein His omnipotence is declared to be chiefly manifested.

“With regard to its subject, mercy is not the greatest virtue, unless that subject be greater than all others, surpassed by none and excelling all: since **for him that has anyone above him it is better to be united to that which is above than to supply the defect of that which is beneath.** Hence, as regards man, who has God above him, charity which unites him to God, is greater than mercy, whereby he supplies the defects of his neighbor.”

“But **of all the virtues which relate to our neighbor, mercy is the greatest**, even as its act surpasses all others, since it belongs to one who is higher and better to supply the defect of another, in so far as the latter is deficient.”

–ST II-II.30.4

*On discerning our proper communicative role
in the church*

Pedagogical relationship

- The pedagogical, healing relationship between the church as mother and her children relies on our media of **communication**
- The turn to **rhetoric**:
 - The rich tradition of speech forms for moral formation: biblical, political, ecclesial
 - How is rhetoric to be appropriated by the dialectical art of moral theology?

Conclusion

The call of the moral theologian

- The recovery of “common sense” ... itself to be articulated in “common speech”
- Perhaps this is the pivotal contribution: a new language that **grasps truth and mirrors it**
- From myth, to dialogue as philosophical method, to the *summam* as contextual and systemic presentation of truth
 - can we recreate an analogous language for the times?

Thank you.