

THE NARTHEX

March-April 2021

'And the disciples were first called
Christians in Antioch' (Acts 11:26)

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FOLLOWING THE SCIENCE

I want to return to what I wrote about in the Sept-Oct '20 Narthex. One of the popular ideas that pass for truth is that Religion and Science must be opposed to one another; that their claims are irreconcilable. But like the notion that people before Christopher Columbus thought that the earth was flat, it needs serious reconsideration. In fact, a little investigation reveals that the popular belief that people in the past thought that the earth was flat, was first put about by a school textbook in the early twentieth century without any real evidence. It was an idea that just spread, uncriticised; indeed, it would have been thought intolerable to cast doubt on this notion. Many people, perhaps the majority, still imagine that people in days gone by thought that the earth was flat.

I shall not presume to speak for religions in general, but when it comes to the purpose of Orthodox Christianity, it functions to keep us connected to the Divine and to one another: that is why we have Holy Tradition, the Creed, doctrines, dogmas, liturgy, sacred scriptures, prayer, ascetic practices, and an inner spiritual experience.

Science has no real competence in any of these things; it is concerned with the examination of physical phenomena, offering rational explanations, and undergoing the rigorous and constant re-evaluation of any findings.

We have heard a lot lately about 'what the science says'. Indeed, Government has insisted, all through the current crisis, that it has followed the science; that it has constructed its policy on the basis of what has been revealed by scientists. However, it would be more accurate to say that Government has followed what a particular school of science has said, but that this will be subject to revision and re-evaluation later on.

This is not a criticism of scientific knowledge when it comes to making government policy. In recent history British governments have always consulted the most up-to-date scientific knowledge in framing their approach to a variety of problems.

The difficulties arise when different schools of science find that they are at

variance with one another over data, results, and peer-reviewed hypotheses. We need not be surprised by this because, as a human activity, Science, like Religion, is not one, monolithic structure. Branches of Science can have conflicts, just as different religions certainly do.

It is to be expected that popular notions are usually well behind the advances and developments in the physical sciences at the level of higher education. With these advances learning becomes very specialised; the polymath of the past is now, to be honest, an extinct sub-species of homo sapiens. Indeed, a few years ago it became obvious that electronic engineering degrees, offered in American universities, produced graduates after four years of study, whose knowledge was already becoming obsolete by the time they finished their courses! What hope for Joe Public in getting to grips with any of this?

Another popular notion about scientific knowledge is that since the 18th century Enlightenment, rationality and reasons have swept away superstition, magic, unquestioning tradition, old-wives-tales, mystery, and even religious belief. It is interesting to note how this 'unravelling of the rainbow' by Science produced in the Arts a rebellion against such mechanical and reductive thought known as the Romantic Movement. By the middle of the 19th century Matthew Arnold's poem, *Dover Beach*, could lament the passing of faith:

*The sea of faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round
earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furl'd;
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges
drear
And naked shingles of the world.*

But like that erroneous report of Mark Twain's death, the prediction of the demise of Religion has proved to be premature. Religions themselves have proved to be very resilient, preserving their pre-eminence and importance in most of the world. In the western world, of course, religious belief and practice has

greatly declined and no doubt, here, it would probably be thought that it is only lack of education and enlightenment that keeps religions functioning elsewhere. This too, though, it turns out, is largely just another of those popular notions.

The modern western mind is content to hold to the idea that Science offers a better way of analysing and evaluating the nature of our experience. Such a mind would certainly put its faith in scientific solutions to any problems, especially when it comes to the areas of health and security. In this issue, however, we, as Orthodox Christians, have but one difference. Whilst accepting the value of scientific knowledge when it comes to the nature of things in the physical world, we still insist that these are not the only questions or perspectives.

Where sciences, for example, might have much to say about the human mind when it comes to the functioning of the brain, it can have no competence or authority when it is a matter of the soul, a spiritual reality of which it can know nothing, no more than a fish can know anything of the other life on land experienced by an amphibian. Moreover, as it is death to a fish to leave the water, so it is the death of science to probe beyond its own milieu.

The primary difference, of course, between Science on the one hand, and Orthodox Christianity on the other (I cannot speak for heterodox forms of Christianity, and certainly not for other religions) is that our Faith comes through Holy Tradition as a result of revelation by God and is fixed; scientific knowledge is an ever-evolving product of enquiry, experiment and theorising. I say our Faith is fixed because it must be; it is the truth about the salvation of the soul which is always applicable, whereas Science must always be pushing out its boundaries, unless you dare to believe (faith, not knowledge!) in a final theory of everything!

It should be clear by now that I see no conflict between these two respectable approaches to our human

experience and condition. They are, however, different approaches with different purposes. It is, therefore, surprising that in a supposedly scientific and rational age, so many in the modern West, especially in the fields of academe, should be so (unscientifically) uncritical in their approach to certain great issues of the day.

It strikes me that there are certain causes, movements, campaigns, and crises that have been presented to the public, yet are largely expected to be received without any question or inquiry. The application of 'cancellation culture', whether by large media corporations or by 'keyboard warriors' (from all sides) on social media, represents a surprisingly unscientific approach to facts and available information.

I shall never forget the words of Bishop John Tinsley (who, at one time, was my bishop in my Anglican days) who said that if an idea is true, then it would bear investigation. It seems now, however, that there are certain matters which are regarded as being beyond even doubt or criticism. The list will include such matters as the effectiveness of lockdowns, global warming, and climate change, transgenderism, critical race theory, the decolonisation of the curriculum.

Stranger still, is that certain heterodox Christian bodies have embraced these causes with an evangelical enthusiasm *as if they were the Gospel*. We are surely aware that the devil can appear as an angel of light (cf. 2 Cor.14:11) and it is in the nature of the demonic to present the appearance of plausible themes and causes in order to delude the incautious. Climate change, for example, is interesting in the way it has been permitted to raise (especially young) people's levels of anxiety, becoming a secular version of the Apocalypse. Instead of fearing (properly) the Last Judgement, there is substituted a call to 'repent' of the use of fossil fuels. Instead of the gospel call to repent of sin, acquire the mind of Christ and partake of the Divine nature, we are offered identity politics and the invitation to recreate ourselves in whatever image takes our fancy.

When institutions, and even ecclesiastical organisations, find room and salaries to provide specific diversity officers and environmental impact assessors, and time out of work to go on courses in training against homophobia and Islamophobia, you know something has gone wrong. But unfortunately for those who think that churches should move on from what they were and *embrace*, (to use the jargon) and awake to the spirit of the age, they already stand condemned by St Paul as having fallen into heresy: *'I marvel that you are turning away...to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have*

preached to you, let him be accursed.' [Gal.1:6-8]

There is a very real spiritual danger that certain churches might convince their co-religionists that participating and promoting such-and-such a cause *is* the gospel of Christ; that this is what Christ came to do! Certainly, being an Orthodox Christian (as an ascetic approach to this world) does involve a respect for the natural creation and love and compassion towards all types and conditions of men, but our priority is to seek first the kingdom of heaven. (cf. Matt.6:33). The faithful themselves may well be involved with righteous causes compatible with Christianity and church leaders and pastors may well condemn and warn against iniquities that lead to damnation, but the Church herself is not an institution or bureaucracy dedicated to promoting dubious and fashionable causes.

In his comic science fiction novel, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Douglas Adams began with the words, '*The Universe is big, very big.*' Well, yes, that is true; there is a lot out there to be explored. In reality it means that Science, as a human pursuit, can never stand still. Science, in a way, is always striving to fail better, if that is not an oxymoron. In other words, it is always under self-criticism and review in order to expand knowledge. It works with models that operate well until better models are found.

Orthodox Christianity, the gospel of Jesus Christ, on the contrary, does not change, it is a revelation of God, a deposit of faith, a cure for the human soul. Although there are always fresh insights, clarifications and explanations, there are no developments in Holy Tradition itself, no new doctrines to be discovered and received by the faithful, no alterations to be made in the form of Christ's body, the Church. We are dealing with the God-given soul and the means of its salvation, not the ever-expanding sum of human knowledge.

How we grasp and comprehend these religious ideas is different from the factual knowledge of science or intellectual ability. Revelation is a divine gift, enlightening and transforming the mind (Gr. *ΝΟΥΣ*) and it becomes a spiritual bond between the persons of God and the believer. It is a relationship confirmed through communion with God and is experienced as a fellowship (Gr. *ΚΟΙΝΩΝΙΑ*) with all the saints and as gift of grace in the love of Christ. Anyone drawn into this experiential and personal relationship with the divine is changed and, if able to express it in words, becomes, in the true sense, a theologian, a speaker of things divine, bearing witness to what he knows. Perhaps this is why Theology was once known as the *Queen of Sciences*.

'That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height—to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.' [Eph.3:17-19]

Fr Chrysostom

SERVICES

Vespers is normally served on Saturdays at 5.00pm and on Wednesdays at 6.00pm.

(Please enter by the side door)

Fr. Chrysostom is available for Confession afterwards or by appointment. Orthros is served before the Divine Liturgy on Sundays at 8.45am

March

Sun 7th Sunday of the Last Judgement (Meatfare) Divine Liturgy 10.30am
Meat-Fast Week
Sun 14th Expulsion of Adam (Cheesefare) Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Mon 15th Beginning of the Great Fast

Sun 21st First Sunday of Great Lent Sunday of Orthodoxy Divine Liturgy 10.30am & Procession of Icons

Thurs 25th The Annunciation to the Theotokos

Sun 28th Second Sunday of Great Lent St Gregory Palamas Divine Liturgy 10.30am

April

Sat 4th Third Sunday of Great Lent Veneration of the Cross Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 11th 4th Sunday of Great Lent St John Climachos Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 18th Fifth Sunday of Great Lent St Mary of Egypt Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Sun 25th Entry of Our Lord (Palm Sunday) St Mark Apostle & Evangelist. Divine Liturgy 10.30am

Passion Week

26th Great & Holy Monday
27th Great & Holy Tuesday
28th Great & Holy Wednesday Anointing Service 7.00pm
29th Great & Holy Thursday Vesperal Divine Liturgy of the Mystical Super 11.00am Service of Twelve Gospels 6.30pm
30th Great & Holy Friday Vespers of the Shroud 4.00pm Orthros (Lamentations Service) 6.30pm