

UNIT 1A: ORTHODOX FAITH AND LIFE

3: What is Truth?

Introduction: Truth vs. Relativism

Pontius Pilate's cry in the Gospel of St. John Chapter 18 has been echoed down the ages; and it seems that it has a particular resonance today when, intellectually speaking, only science seems to offer the kind of objective truth once claimed by theology itself. In some ways this shift has been accelerated by our shrinking world and the challenge of meeting those of other faiths within it. Of course, Christians knew of the existence of other religions in times past, but they were rarely encountered on home soil and could be just as easily dismissed by the collective description "heathen" or "pagan." Today when your next door neighbour is likely to be Jewish, a Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or Sikh - at least in Europe - it is less easy for many to understand or even accept that in matters of faith one religion might be right and the other wrong. It falls to a later lecture to consider the truth claims of other religions compared with those of Orthodox Christianity. In this study we shall confine ourselves to a consideration of the conception of truth in Christianity.

To the outsider, sympathetic or otherwise, faith has lost its anchorage in truth, because secularly oriented society has become dominated by relativism - the philosophical position that denies there are absolute values, asserting that what may be true in one situation may not be true in another. In some ways, relativism is rather convenient for human relations, since everyone can believe as they wish without thinking about anyone else and their world view. However, in a theological context, relativism is a complete denial of the existence of God in monotheistic terms and His primacy in our lives. Within monotheism, largely but not exclusively in the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, relativism means that doctrine does not matter that much if one takes the lowest common denominator as normative. To orthodox (lower case "o") believers in these three religions such

reductionism is completely unacceptable as faith loses its coherence and depth - and hence also its human value if it is pared down to such alleged bare essentials.

This relativism presents other particular problems for faiths that interpret history and historical events as the stage on which God's action takes place. There is a scientific component to religious truth in these historical religions because there is a reliance on historical evidence as well as religious experience. In Orthodox Christianity there can be no opposition between truths that span revelation and human truths that are lived out in history. Evidence and faith arbitrate in both realms as one.

From a Christian point of view, there can only be one consistent realm of Truth worthy of the name; and this is to be found in the Logos—that is, in Christ, the Word made flesh, the Way, the Truth and the Life made known, (John 14:6). It is not of course necessary for everyone to accept this centring on Christ as the All-Inclusive-Truth for it actually to be the case. The final revelation of this Truth is not until the End when God will be “all and in all” (1 Corinthians 15:28). Although it is the overwhelming reality of the coming presence of End Times when Christ shall come again that shall ultimately confirm the barren fantasies of relativism and the resulting denial of Christ, we should never seek or anticipate these End Times, as noted in the final sentence of the opening lecture of this E-Quip course.

In the light of these clear base lines for Truth, there is no room for compartmentalisation. Distinctions exist of course between the differing genres of truth—scientific, religious, poetic, artistic, mythic and literary, but there are no ultimately conflicting separations or oppositions. As, one of the earliest martyrs of the Church, Justin has insisted: “Whatever things were rightly said among all men are the property of us Christians” (2nd Apology, Chap. 13). Furthermore, it must always be remembered that the foundation for the Orthodox approach to truth can be found in both the Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church. The reality before us is precisely what was written by St. John the Theologian concerning the

Incarnation of Christ: “The true Light which coming into the world enlightens every man” (John 1:9).

The Church Fathers and the Search for Truth

The Fathers had to contend in their own day against those who set the revealed truth of the Scriptures and Tradition of the Church against scientific truth. Among them was St. Augustine, whose lengthy comments on this matter deserve repeating here in full since they still apply in our own day to all those misguided Christians and intransigent atheists alike who would suppose evolution and divine creation to be incompatible. St. Augustine wrote:

Even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world, about the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions, about the predictable eclipses of the sun and moon, the cycles of the years and the seasons, about the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones and so forth; and this knowledge he holds as being certain from reason and experience. Now it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn.¹

Here then is a strong warning both to modern day creationists who reject evolution, as well as to those of any age who reject the validity of scientific truth within its own realm.

St. Basil the Great in turn wrote to his students, encouraging them to study secular literature if it was conducive to virtue and truth. He compared the resulting

¹ St. Augustine, *Commentary on Genesis*, Vol. 1, pp. 42-43. With commentary by Dr. Ken Smith at: <http://noanswersingenesis.org.au/saintaugustine.htm> . Accessed 12 October 2013.

discernment process to a bee seeking out good nectar wherever it might be found, as well as rivers that broaden and deepen as they empty into the sea:

Now, we can learn all of that, no doubt, and in a much more perfect way, in our own Scriptures. But for the moment, at least, a sort of an outline of virtue can be drawn for us by secular teaching. Those who are careful to gather whatever is useful wherever they find it are like great rivers: they find increase after increase coming to them from all sides quite naturally.²

Thus, both for St. Augustine and for St. Basil the Great, Truth is one; and all truths are to be found personally in Christ who gathers unto Himself all that is true, beautiful and good.

How Are Truth and Beauty and the Good Linked Together?

The linking of truth and beauty is perhaps best known through its poetic expression in the closing lines of John Keats' poem, *Ode to a Grecian Urn*: "Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."³ The precise meaning of this couplet is open to many interpretations, but one perspective is that both truth and beauty are in an essential respect the same because they both converge on the universal and transcendent harmony between that which is authentic (truth) and that which is appealing to human sensibilities (beauty). Ironically, once the emotional foundations of beauty and the intellectual foundations of truth are acknowledged as different ways of knowing, then the

² St. Basil the Great, *For the Young on How They Might Derive Profit from Hellenic Literature*, https://www.tertullian.org/fathers/basil_litterature01.htm Accessed 18 November 2023

³ John Keats (1795-1821), *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. Poetry Foundation. Available at: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44477/ode-on-a-grecian-urn> Accessed 18 November 2023.

possibility of “understanding” the unity of truth and beauty becomes confused, because different grounds of knowing are being compared.

It remains possible of course to describe and account for beauty in ideal forms (for example, the human form) in an intellectually and empirically satisfactory manner. It is not for subjective reasons alone that Michelangelo’s David is considered by most to be beautiful. Our response to beauty can, in some measure, be described by science.⁴ Also, truth itself can have the aspect of beauty, most famously in the simplicity and elegance, both sought after and found, in those intellectually formulated equations that describe the workings of the Cosmos,⁵ (e.g. $S=kA/lp^4$ for the entropy of black holes and $E=mc^2$ for the relationship between mass and energy.) Nonetheless, on their own grounds, truth and beauty function as different modes of cognition. Furthermore, once intellectual truth is considered as a moral entity then the good also needs to be considered.

A central issue in focusing on the meaning of truth, beauty and the good is whether these values are objective and outside of the individual or simply dependent upon individual perception or belief. In dispute is the extent to which relativism accurately describes human behaviour or whether a search for absolute values is appropriate. The first major relativist philosopher was Protagoras⁶ (c. 490-c.420 BCE) who argued in his book *Truth*, that “Humans are measure of all things” and that “all values—truth, good, beauty, even existence” are “dependent upon the human observer.” In opposition to Protagoras’s radical relativism, Plato contended in *The Republic* that there is a dual level conception of reality. This dual level of reality contains “the divided line” in which the attributes of objective reality are above the line, while the attributes of relative reality are below the line:

⁴ Hatice Gunes, “A Survey of Perception and Computation of Human Beauty” at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254002728_A_survey_of_perception_and_computation_of_human_beauty Accessed 18 November 2023.

⁵ BBC, “Beautiful Equations” at <https://dai.ly/x6098g4> Accessed 18 November 2023

⁶ Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/protagoras/> Accessed 18 November 2023

One	Identity	Permanent	Divine	Soul	Reason	Truth	Knowledge
Many	Difference	Changing	Human	Body	Senses	Appearance	Opinion

Although the human condition is characterized by the lower level, in Plato's view, we have the capacity to aspire to and seek the upper attributes. That is certainly an improvement on Protagoras in addressing the objective reality and unity of truth, beauty and goodness but it famously suffers from Plato's dualistic disdain of the possibility of finding such fullness and such harmony in this world. Christ's preaching was that the Kingdom of God was breaking into this world and refashioning it from above from whence it came. This is a re-creation narrative whereas Plato's doctrine is of a flight from this illusory and shadowy world.

The Challenge: Reconciling Oppositional Claims to Truth

However, even if we accept the human capacity to seek and gain Truth as an absolute value, and indeed that in Christ, the Truth has found us, there remains the apparent problem of oppositional truth claims. For example, neurobiology distinguishes between "the brain" and "the mind;" and the French neurobiologist Jean-Pierre Changeux's reductionist-oriented study is entitled, *The Good, the True, and the Beautiful: A Neuronal Approach*, in contrast to the more holistic perspective of Thomas Nagel.⁷

Furthermore, for many decades now in the West, some have defined truth in the very narrow manner of logical positivism - a philosophy that reduces all truth to logically deducible propositions from observable evidence. This approach has more or less broken down under its own weight, because it has become patently clear that its associated reductionism (i.e. the belief that complex phenomena can be explained in terms of something simpler) fails to account for different genres of truth which are not susceptible to the scientific method. Sadly, the intellectual

⁷ See Daniel J. Siegel, *Pocket Guide to Interpersonal Neurobiology: An Integrative Handbook of the Mind* (New York: Norton, 2012); Jean-Pierre Changeux and Laurence Garey, *The Good, the True and the Beautiful: A Neuronal Approach* (New Haven, CO: Yale University Press, 2012); and Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature Is Almost Certainly Wrong* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

climate in philosophy in the west after the Second World War has remained hostile to metaphysical and theological conceptions of truth; and the literary emphasis of its main protagonists has emphasised story or contextual narratives, which in turn have tended to dissipate in post-modern relativism.

The diversity of human experience, culture and religious sensibilities has made it increasingly difficult for post-modernism to imagine any possible resolution of competing truth claims, particularly between the domains of the dominant global religions. Since in Orthodoxy all truth claims are grounded in the Tradition of The Church, perhaps the Orthodox stress upon community and relatedness can help us out of the impasse of the essentially individualistic and highly subjectivised approach of postmodernism. Metropolitan John Zizioulas of Pergamon has rightly insisted that “there is no true being without communion” and that “a person cannot be imagined within himself but only within his relationships.”⁸ Religious experience is intensely personal and yet it is located in a community of faith—not in a laboratory, a library or even the mind of a reflective subject. How, therefore, might competing truth claims be resolved when communities themselves sustain incompatible accounts? We may know what we like in the art gallery but that cannot help us when defending a notion of right believing (i.e. Orthodoxy) against heresy. Must norms of belief be viewed as entirely relative to the communities that sustain them? Post-modernism indeed supposes that there can be no metanarrative of universal truth binding us all. However, if we agree with such a negative perspective of truth, how can we hang on to a notion of Orthodoxy (both upper and lower case) linked to universal truth?

The Resolution: Finding Appropriate Criteria of Discernment

Rather than handing in the towel to post-modernism, let us recall what was said earlier about Christ—that He is All-Truth at its Omega, it’s End-point. This

⁸ John D. Zizioulas [now Metropolitan John of Pergamon], *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997), pp. 18, 105.

rescues us from the kind of exclusivism that rules out God's action outside the Church, yet realistically includes all that is good within the Incarnation, recapitulating (as St. Irenaeus of Lyons taught) the fullness of our human nature and history, (Lecture 7 page 3). But, we are not yet at this Omega point, so how can we present Christ as the Truth NOW amongst all this competing subjectivity? Would that not require some criterion of discernment that separated the wheat from the chaff, true prophecy as it were from magic crystals? All of these E-Quip lectures are based on the premise that precisely such a criterion is essential to sustain life in Christ.

There are in effect at least two main criteria. First, amongst the historical faiths considerable discernment arises from what actually happened. Therefore, if the Ever Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, only imagined Gabriel's message, then Jesus had a natural conception; and the Gospel is false. If the tomb wasn't actually empty, then the resurrection didn't happen; and the Gospel again falls and Christianity with it. Clearly, what actually did happen does matter. History is no mere metaphor, but a record created by different authors with different perspectives on how God and mankind have persevered over the centuries. Herbert Butterfield is right to stress that events in history can be seen "with three different kinds of knowledge"—analysing human action, historical and natural laws, and Providence;" and that "the first level we may study almost biographically; the second we uncover through scientific analysis of regularities and tendencies; and the third we approach by faith."⁹

The other criterion concerns holiness. Although a subjective judgement to some extent, true goodness with its handmaid, beauty, is not an illusion in the affairs of humankind. Perhaps the Orthodox above all need to insist that there is verifiable religious truth; and the credibility of this stance is based on recognisable transformations in both persons and communities. "By their fruits you shall know

⁹ Herbert Butterfield, "God in History," in C. T. McIntire (ed.), *Herbert Butterfield: Writings on Christianity and History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 3-16. Cf. C. T. McIntire, *Herbert Butterfield* (New Haven, CO: Yale University Press, 2004).

them” as our Lord taught (Matthew 7:16). This test, which we might call Orthopraxy, needs to have traceable contexts in Orthodox believing and worship, so that Orthodoxy in belief and worship leads to Orthopraxy in lived experience. This applies also to human experience more generally, where the fullness of Truth “once revealed to the saints” (Colossians 1:26) is to be found in the Logos acting in the Cosmos. In this manner the problematic question: “What is Truth?” might more readily be answered, with perhaps some surprising results. How then shall we resolve this question?

If indeed the key to the Universe is self-giving Love, (because that is the personal driving force toward the development of sentient beings and their integration into God), then just like the modern search for a Grand Unified Theory / Theory of Everything which will unite the fundamental forces of Creation, we in turn are searching for that Divine Love which is and will be “all and in all”¹⁰. The difference between these two is that scientific truth involves a search to dispel the unknown whereas Orthodox Christianity attests to the Unknown who has made Himself known.¹¹ A Christian conception of Truth is [therefore] both historically demonstrable and the expression of Divine Love. It leaves nothing out but transforms everything. It rejoices in the good and as such it is beautiful.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 15:28.

¹¹ John 1:18