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Modernity's Catastrophic Paradigm Shift

Posted By *Rod Dreher* On November 1, 2018 @ 4:31 pm In | [79 Comments](#)



I can't recommend strongly enough [philosopher Michael Hanby's essay in *First Things*, on "the de-Hellenization of Christianity."](#) ^[1] It's so good that I'm rewriting my talk for Saturday to include insights from it. In the speech I plan to give, I'm going to discuss what Solzhenitsyn meant when he said, in his Templeton Prize address, that the source of our ills today is that "men have forgotten God."

What Solzhenitsyn meant was that men today have lost consciousness of the divine dimension of reality. To be clear, Solzhenitsyn was not talking about the God of the philosophers, but the God of the Bible, who is not a metaphysical abstraction. But this can also entail God in a metaphysical way — and that's what Hanby is talking about in his essay.

Hanby begins by talking about the loss of authority within the Catholic Church as a result of the abuse crisis, but he warns that one can't understand the crisis if one thinks of it in terms of the progressive-vs-conservative paradigm:

Even so, we should not pretend that this crisis began five years ago or that the Catholic left has a monopoly on de-Hellenized Christianity. It also abides, albeit more subtly and perhaps with less self-awareness, in the combination of political pragmatism, moralism, and theological positivism that has characterized much of recent thought on the Catholic right. The crisis posed by modernity, in other words, is one for the whole Church, and the fact that we take recourse to these political designations to denote what is a spiritual, theological, and metaphysical crisis—and indeed a profound crisis of both faith and reason, a loss of vision, within the Church itself—says something about the power it exercises over imaginations.

The essence of de-Hellenization is a loss of "the superiority of the immutable over the changeable," a superiority, paradoxically, that ensures that the mundane things of this world—for example, man and woman—are invested with inherent meaning and intelligibility as symbol and image of the immutable. In theological terms, this means the inevitable loss of the transcendent otherness and holiness of God, whose subjective correlate is "the fear of the Lord." This loss is most conspicuous in the liturgy of the post-conciliar Church, or at least in the manner in which it is often celebrated, with its saccharine pieties, sentimental pop music, therapeutic homilies, and drive-through Communion lines. Whatever the merits of traditionalist arguments against the *Novus Ordo*, they are surely right in at least this much. Where the majesty of God's holiness is absent from the liturgy of the Church, fear of the Lord cannot long survive among the people, be they clerical or lay.

But while restoration of the liturgy may be a necessary condition for a true "sense of God," it is not a sufficient one. Treated as such, it always risks degenerating into a kind of boutique Catholicism, external to our fundamental apprehension of the world. For this spiritual deprivation has an intellectual corollary. Philosophically speaking, de-Hellenization means the eclipse of an order of being, nature, and truth that transcends history, the triumph of time over eternity, with the corresponding reduction of nature to meaningless matter and a reduction of truth to so many social, political, or psychological "situations."

Read the whole thing. ^[1] I can't do justice to it by excerpting it. It is my contention that Orthodox Christianity has something particular to offer to fight against this "de-Hellenization." I'll post a text of my talk on Saturday, after I deliver it.

Hanby has a superb line in the piece:

We are waiting for another — doubtless very different — Maximus Confessor.

St. Maximus the Confessor was a seventh-century theologian who is especially revered in the Orthodox Church. The other day I posted this passage from the contemporary Orthodox theologian Dumitru Staniloae, taken from his book *Orthodox Spirituality* ^[2]. I offer it again for your consideration in light of Hanby's essay:

So it is a main idea of St. Maximus that things hide divine *logoi* in them, as so many rays of the supreme Logos. He who discovers them in things ascends on their thread to the knowledge of God and this knowledge must anticipate His direct knowledge.

This teaching attributed to creation and the thought referring to it a necessary role in the ascent of man to God. St. Maximus is a stranger to the idea of a vision which we might attain by bypassing the forms and laws of the cosmos. On the road of our approach to God stands the world – we must pass through the understanding of it. Every man has a mission connected with the world. Everyone must know it according to the power given to him, inasmuch as knowledge can't come until the gaining of the virtues; everyone must develop beforehand a moral activity in relationship to the world. A mainly

negative attitude toward the world frustrates salvation itself. The world is imposed on everyone as a stone for sharpening his spiritual faculties.

By the world man grows to the height of the knowledge of God and to the capacity of being His partner. The world is a teacher to lead us to Christ. Of course it can also be the road to hell. It is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the tree of testing. If we look at its beauty in order to praise its creator, we are saved; if we think that its fruit is pure and simply something to eat, we are lost. Salvation isn't obtained in isolation, but in a cosmic frame. This value of the world as a road to God is explained by the fact that man must have an object of giant proportions for strengthening his spiritual forces, but also from the intrinsic structure of the world as a symbol of transcendent divine realities. A symbol (from the Greek *symballein*, to throw together, to unite two things without confusing them), is a visible reality which doesn't only represent, but somehow makes an unseen reality visible. A symbol presupposes and sows two things simultaneously. It is a "bridge between two worlds" as somebody has said. A word, for example, is a symbol of the spirit, uniting and simultaneously presenting the materiality of the sound with the meaning of thought without confusing them; the human face, likewise, makes the spirit in man transparent by its materiality, and if he is living in Him, God Himself. A symbolic consciousness of the world "sees everywhere in this world the signs and symbols of another world, and perceives the divine as the mysterious and infinite, beyond that which is finite and transitory." [Berdyayev]

All flesh is a symbol of the spirit, the reflection, the image, and the sign of another far off, yet much more profound, reality.

The alliance of these two worlds, the possibility of their interpenetration, the transfusion of energy from one world into the other, are all communicated to us by means of this symbolic sign. This symbol unveils for us the life of God and signifies for us the entrance of divine energy into the life of this natural world. But on the other hand it guards for all time the sense of infinite mystery and affirms the impossibility of reducing to a common denominator the life of the world and the life of the spirit. Symbolism does not admit the validity of that ossification and isolation of the flesh and the natural world which results from transforming them into entities incapable of permeation by the infinitude of God and the Spirit.

As we turn aside from the life of this world our whole attention is fixed upon the unfathomable and the ineffable; everywhere we are in contact with the mysterious and we see the light of another world, in which nothing ever comes to an end, and which knows no subordination. The world is open to the light, it has no limits, it penetrates into other worlds, and they in turn penetrate into it. Here there is nothing hard or rigid which cannot be subdued.

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- [1] philosopher Michael Hanby's essay in *First Things*, on "the de-Hellenization of Christianity.": <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/11/a-false-paradigm>
- [2] *Orthodox Spirituality*: https://www.amazon.com/Orthodox-Spirituality-Practical-Faithful-Definitive-ebook/dp/B00B2YF6J8/ref=sr_1_2?ie=UTF8&qid=1541104198&sr=8-2&keywords=staniloae&dpID=61wHc6YEImL&preST=_SY445_QL70_&dpSrc=srch
- [3] : <https://turmarion.wordpress.com/2018/05/27/nulla-scriptura-revisited/>
- [4] : <https://turmarion.wordpress.com/2012/07/24/dualism-and-its-discontents/>
- [5] : <https://turmarion.wordpress.com/2014/01/24/i-want-your-psycho-your-vertigo-schtick-lady-gaga-open-theology-and-my-1500th-post/>
- [6] : https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turtles_all_the_way_down
- [7] : <https://turmarion.wordpress.com/2012/09/09/picking-and-choosing-the-new-testament/>
- [8] : <https://turmarion.wordpress.com/2012/08/07/the-pretty-good-book-index-in-progress/>
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- [10] : https://www.amazon.com/Rethinking-Gnosticism-Argument-Dismantling-Category/dp/0691005427/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1541440282&sr=8-1&keywords=gnosticism+category
- [11] : <https://turmarion.wordpress.com/2018/07/01/was-it-satan/>

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