A FALSE PARADIGM

Michael Hanby argues against the de-Hellenization of Christianity.

So much for the "new paradigm." With the Church now mired in its most severe crisis since the Protestant Reformation, the heady talk of last spring now seems as distant as the "Catholic moment" or the "springtime of evangelization." Rightly or wrongly, the idea of a gauzy mercy without justice or truth appears suspiciously self-serving for a Church that has so much to confess. And if indeed the Church is entering a "new ecclesial season," as some progressive prelates are wont to say, it is most certainly a long, cold winter that is unlikely to pass within our lifetimes or even those of our children, assuming their faith survives the sins of their fathers.

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Explanations abound for how we got here, ranging from the theological to the sociological and from the universal to the particular. The spectrum runs from the *mysterium iniquitatis* to a clerical culture of deference and secrecy and a homosexual subculture (or superculture) within the hierarchy that imposes a structure of silent duplicity even upon the innocent. It includes questionable financial dealings among princes grown fat and soft like suitors upon the fruits of an earlier harvest, as well as the collective moral failings of a group of weak and mediocre men. In keeping with the Aristotelian/Thomist principle that the same effect can proceed from multiple causes and vice versa, "as a man and the sun are the cause of a man," I am inclined to think that all these theories contain at least an element of truth, and some more than an element, though each risks condemning the good and the innocent along with the wicked and the guilty.

And so, my own attempt to comprehend the meaning of this terrible moment doesn't seek to exclude alternative explanations, much less prevent concrete action against those who have perpetrated abuses or concealed the truth. I simply seek to understand how all these explanations could be true by understanding more deeply what underlies them and what they share in common. Though the "new paradigm," as it has been promoted to us up till now, may have discredited itself, this crisis forces us to ask whether we may have undergone an even more profound paradigm shift than the proponents of this notion have perceived, and whether it may bear some responsibility for the current situation.

A paradigm, in the sense given to it by Thomas Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, is the shared world of a community of practitioners, with its stock of unexamined assumptions, problems, and standards. It makes what Kuhn calls "normal science" possible. Any tradition of discourse that develops organically in a cumulative way may be called a paradigm. It was Kuhn's discovery that the actual history of science is not one of continuous advance against a set of perennial and self-evident problems, but rather more like a series of "conversions" between radically different "world views." That paradigm switches seem to entail an "arbitrary" historical element, at least from the viewpoint of modern rationalism, is one reason why Kuhn's proposal, like the MacIntyrian notion of tradition which is its cousin, was so controversial. Since their theories offered no transcendental criteria for adjudicating between paradigms and no guarantee that the shift from one paradigm to another is rational or progressive, their positions appear to invite relativism and irrationalism. Each rejected the charge, offering what were essentially pragmatic criteria for the rational vindication of one paradigm against its rivals, though I, for my part, prefer von Balthasar's more speculative version. Whoever sees the most wins.

It is obvious that one cannot coherently subscribe to a Newman-esque theory of organic development and a Kuhnian theory of paradigm change at the same time, as some have recently pretended to do. Development takes place *within* a paradigm, not *between* them. A paradigm shift is therefore a crisis by definition. It denotes a break, the passing away of one world and the coming-to-be of another, unless the predecessor succeeds at projecting itself forward into history and comprehending its rivals. A paradigm shift can be occasioned by any number of historical factors, but it is precisely this wholesale movement between worlds that makes them revolutionary rather than progressive. And this radical break is why rival paradigms are incommensurable, perhaps the aspect of this theory most troubling to its critics.

Incommensurability means that there is no agreement about background assumptions, standards of evidence, hence, no common subject matter over which protagonists of opposing paradigms may have a proper argument. This has been a great source of confusion, historically speaking. For example, it is not that the Newtonian explanation of motion vanquished the Aristotelian explanation, as so much Whig historiography would have it; it's rather that the Aristotelian and Newtonian paradigms mean radically different things by "motion" and even "explanation" itself. The transition from one to the other occurs without much of a debate having taken place. Common terms such as "entity," "cause," and "motion"—or perhaps "mercy," "marriage," and "conscience" in recent ecclesial controversies—may survive from one paradigm to the next, but a change in meaning has taken place. The terms no longer refer to the same things. A victorious paradigm does not advance, therefore, by *refuting* its predecessor. It succeeds, rather, by changing the subject, by no longer looking at the world in the same way or asking the same questions. The problems that preoccupied the old paradigm simply cease to be relevant anymore.

Richard Rorty's brutal postmortem on the revolution within Western philosophy and culture describes Kuhn's notion of a paradigm shift with perfect clarity. On the one side stands the Platonic tradition, which remained unbroken, in his telling, from Plato to Hegel, despite occasional interruptions by

"impure" or transitional figures such as Locke and Kant. On the other stands the new, post-Hellenic tradition, represented in Europe by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Wittgenstein and in America by the pragmatists William James and John Dewey. Rorty thought the latter best exemplified the modern way, since unlike the Europeans, the Americans "wrote . . . in a spirit of social hope" and "rejected neither the Enlightenment's choice of the scientist as moral example nor the technological civilization which science had created."

> Pragmatists think that the history of attempts to isolate the True or the Good, or to define the word "true" or "good" supports their suspicion that there is no interesting work to be done in this area. It might, of course, have turned out otherwise. People have, oddly enough, found something interesting to say about the essence of Force and the definition of "number." They might have found something interesting to say about the essence of Truth. But in fact they haven't. The history of attempts to do so, and of criticisms of such attempts, is roughly coextensive with the history of that literary genre we call "philosophy"—a genre founded by Plato. So pragmatists see the Platonic tradition as having outlived its usefulness. This does not mean that they have a new, non-Platonic set of answers to Platonic questions to offer, but rather that they do not think we should ask those questions anymore. When they suggest that we do not ask questions about the nature of Truth and Goodness, they do not invoke a theory about the nature of reality or knowledge or man which says that "there is no such thing" as Truth or Goodness. They would simply like to change the subject.

Those who continue to ask the obsolete questions or to use the old vocabulary suffer a predictable fate. Their arguments are not denied or refuted, merely ignored. "They are simply read out of the profession," Kuhn says—"frozen out," in James's chilling words, "as the ultramontane type of priest is frozen out in protestant lands."

Whether proponents of an ecclesial paradigm shift intended to break so radically with tradition and to "freeze out" their opponents is for them to say and history to judge. It would perhaps be unfair to burden its progressive proponents with the full weight of its Kuhnian meaning, just as it would be unfair to charge the pope with full responsibility for bringing this change about. My question, rather, is whether we are indeed undergoing a more profound paradigm shift than we realize, and what it would ultimately mean for the Christian future if such a thing were to come to pass. If denizens of different paradigms inhabit something like different worlds, and paradigm shifts consist to a great extent in *not seeing* the world in the same way or asking the same questions anymore, then what is it that we would no longer be able to see or think about once this paradigm shift is complete?

Rorty's remark is illuminating because the revolution he celebrates is not confined to philosophy in its narrow, modern sense as an academic discipline. It is the very same crisis that has confronted the Church throughout modernity, constituting its central intellectual preoccupation from *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* to Vatican II and beyond, a crisis which appears to be reaching a critical stage in our own day. John Paul II, and later Benedict XVI, described it as the "eclipse of the sense of God and of man." The late Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce specifies it further by describing it as the de-Hellenization, or more precisely, the de-Platonization, of Christianity and the West. The resurgence of progressive Catholicism appears to signal a new stage in this crisis. For the very essence of progressive Catholicism, according to Del Noce, is an opposition to biblical and Greek thought (which it often derides as "Gnostic").

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." Whether in its Platonic-Augustinian or later Aristotelian-Thomist form, the superiority of the immutable, Del Noce writes,

> expresses the essential metaphysical principle of the Catholic tradition, which says that everything that is participates necessarily in universal principles, which are the eternal and immutable essences contained in the permanent actuality of the divine intellect. So that all things—no matter how contingent they may be in themselves—translate or represent the principles in their own way and according to their order of existence.

Of course, as we have seen, one need not deny or refute this traditional understanding to effect a paradigm shift to a de-Hellenized Christianity. Indeed, one could even affirm or exalt it in an ideal sense. It is enough that it simply cease to factor into our understanding of God and the world in any meaningful way. This will always involve a denial of the obvious if the Greek sense of being is *true*, but turning a blind eye to reality is an art at which we have become quite practiced.

The paradigm shift to a de-Hellenized Christianity has not only changed what we think *about*; it has transformed the very meaning of thought itself. As Del Noce says, "the primacy of contemplation, the primacy of the immutable, and the reality of an eternal order are equivalent affirmations, which coincide with taking intellectual intuition as the definition of the model of knowledge. The recognition of this form of knowledge is inseparable from the very possibility of metaphysical thought." Absent this possibility, contemplation loses its meaning and becomes wholly subordinate to action. Fundamental questions—*human* questions such as "What is man?" "What is happiness?" and "What is freedom?"—heretofore essential to social, political, and religious life, cease to be asked, because we live in a pluralist society that cannot agree on the answers and doesn't really care. In the monolithic immanentism of the new paradigm, nothing transcends the historical flux to correspond to these questions. Questions in the "what is" form can thus no longer be intelligibly posed within the dominant form of reason, which can only ask the functional questions "How many, how far, by what influence, and to what effect?" Ideas cease to *disclose* reality and are set in opposition to it as instruments for its manipulation. Authority for the intelligibility of nature is handed over to the empirical and experimental sciences and their functional explanations. It does not matter that functionalist questions are the only kind of questions that the sciences can answer. Nor does it matter that the conclusions of science are rarely as definitive as those who wield "science" as a rhetorical and political weapon pretend them to be. It is enough that scientific progress promises, in Del Noce's words, "the constant surpassing of what is given." Marx's final thesis on Feuerbach, that "philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it," merely brings to full expression the inner logic of de-Hellenized reason that manifests itself in every field from science to journalism.

Moral reason fares no better than speculative reason under these conditions. "Conservatives" of the new paradigm who nevertheless wish to toe the line on the old morality but are cut off from the order of nature and the eternal law find themselves articulating our obligation to natural law on the model of modern, positive law, which is to say, arbitrarily. It is a small wonder that such arguments have had little traction in the public sphere. Meanwhile, "progressives" either obscure the intelligibility of human action so that it can rarely be said with certainty that the law is transgressed, or they exalt a mercy that surpasses the law to the point of occasionally commanding us to disobey it, a tactic that looks even more suspicious in the light of present circumstances. That this would import fundamental contradictions into the doctrine of God is beside the point, for doctrine ceases to matter once it is safely relegated to a realm of abstractions divorced from the "concrete realities" of historical life. The conclusion in either case, after the abolition of being and nature, is a form of pastoral care celebrated for its thoughtlessness and scarcely distinguishable from therapy. It can counsel little more than psychological integration and an ethics of authenticity, since the new paradigm affords no criterion of nature, truth, or ontological identity

higher than one's own self-understanding or the functional facts of the empirical or quasi-empirical sciences.

Venality, corruption, perversion, cowardice, conspiracy, and mendacity—these did not begin with modernity, and small-souled men have always been with us. If the intuition here is correct, however, the crisis now engulfing the Church is not just a profound moral failure. Rather, this great moral crisis cannot be separated from the great crisis of faith and reason plaguing the modern Church at its very heart, a crisis personified by a number of prominent and quintessentially modern character types responsible, if not for perpetuating the crisis of abuse, cowardice, and secrecy, then for governing its interpretation.

With being and nature reduced to historical process and with thought reduced to a pragmatic form of practical reason, it is inevitable that psychology and the social sciences replace philosophy and theology as the Church's primary modes of thinking and speaking. The place once occupied by theologians, philosophers, and the great doctors of the Church is taken up by a new, "somewhat farcical-looking character," as Del Noce describes him, "the engaged religious sociologist." He may still be called an historian or a theologian and hailed as an expert by an unserious world that confuses thinking with tweeting—no doubt he regards himself as such—but these words would no longer mean the same thing, and a properly theological or philosophical thought is scarcely able to cross his mind. Del Noce says of such a person that you cannot argue *with* him, for thought, now reduced to an instrument for some practical purpose, no longer seeks to understand the truth. You can only argue *in front of him,* in the hope that it might awaken some dormant memory or stimulate his critical reflection.

A close cousin of the engaged religious sociologist is the so-called "Vatican watcher," the theological journalist who today is so prominent in setting and interpreting the theological agenda that, in truth, the Church can hardly be said to debate theology anymore. It debates journalism. Even when he is not overtly functioning as a partisan or a propagandist in the Catholic "civil war," he ensures in advance that every question facing the Church will be understood in the most superficial political terms. This is true even of good journalism, of which there has been plenty during this crisis. For journalism, as a species of empiricism, is animated by the conceit that the world lies transparent to its way of knowing, without the need for real education or formation or transformation on the part of the journalist. Adherence to the journalistic method suffices to make the world known. But for this to be true, the world must be reduced to a collection of quasi-independent facts, discrete units of self-evident meaning that admit of endless addition and subtraction but no further intellectual *penetration.* The world that confronts even the good journalist is therefore a world already remade in the image of journalism's superficial, two-dimensional assumptions. It's a suffocating world in which nothing transcends historical "situations" or the immanent machinations of power, and in which no other form of reasoning can ever really become visible to challenge these assumptions or disturb journalism's unshakeable confidence in its own competence.

Accompanying them both is another familiar figure, the celebrity priest, who curries the favor of a sympathetic media and appropriates the nomenclature of the secular culture to shame and silence his coreligionists over sexual matters, willfully indifferent to the fact that this language entails an entire theory of human nature at odds with a Catholic understanding of man and creation. This phenomenon is less astonishing for its brazenness, or even its heretical implications, than for its cynicism. He is assisted (and protected) by another character type who routinely makes his appearance on the contemporary scene, the managerial bishop, presiding over a massive bureaucratic apparatus indistinguishable from the administrative state. He is a company man, more technocrat than theocrat, who has internalized the world's functionalist understanding of his sacramental office, and whose religious imagination seems little more than an amalgam of shopworn theological platitudes barely contemplated and bureaucratic jargon drained of blood by the legal department. He speaks gravely of "procedural failure," "transparency," "conducting a thorough investigation," and "accountability," seemingly unaware of just how empty these words sound to his betrayed flock, when what is really needed are some holy, honest, and courageous men. We are waiting for another—doubtless very different—Maximus Confessor.

It would not be difficult to attach names and specific words and deeds to these characters. They are legion. But they are more important for our purposes as representatives of patterns of thought and life that are pervasive in modern Catholicism and modern life more generally. They exemplify the "eclipse of the sense of God," but not because they are unbelieving and immoral men necessarily. Clearly some are, but experience shows that pious belief in a truncated God and moralism in both the left- and right-wing variations can live quite comfortably in the shadow of the eclipse. The point, rather, is that God's being and the meaning of our creaturehood inform neither their basic

conception of the world nor the fundamental mode and pattern of their thinking. God only enters into their thought secondarily, in a reduced, superficial, extrinsic, and in cynical cases, instrumental way—as an addendum to empiricist, historicist, and technical ways of thinking that are functionally atheistic.

With the abolition of the *vita contemplativa* and its transcendent order of nature, being, and truth, thought inevitably becomes a mere instrument of action. The distinction between a *theoria* that seeks to understand reality and a practical reason aimed at the achievement of some practical good all but disappears, leaving a void that is inevitably filled by politics, the science of power, which is as dominant in the Church as it is in the rest of modern life. Truth, being, and nature in their traditional, metaphysical sense are replaced by the functional truths of the sciences and what Machiavelli called the effectual truth (*verità effettuale*) of politics: what is needful for securing and maintaining power or even for achieving some legitimate good, such as the unity of the Church. What really matters within this paradigm, then, is control over institutions and personnel, influence over public policy, and, above all, message control and skillful management of the media. Images become more important than reality, seemingly more important than being. The stage is set for a culture of falsehood long before there is ever a secret to conceal and before the time of trial arrives to test the virtue of men.

The only alternative to the tradition of Christian Platonism, broadly understood, is a paradigm already condemned by Pope Francis as technocratic. The world of the technocratic paradigm is one devoid of form and finality, without inherent meaning or transcendental truth. It is a world where reason, perpetually at war with reality, no longer seeks to understand things as they are in their nature—for nature is simply whatever happens, or can be made to happen, in the course of history—but to realize what is possible through its own Promethean efforts. It is impossible to sin against such a nature, unless, perhaps, by leaving a large carbon footprint. It is a world without real thought—for technocratic reason has already determined that there is nothing really to think deeply about—containing only problems to be solved by applying appropriate technical, political, managerial, or therapeutic techniques. The technocratic paradigm is thus a virtual factory that systematically produces the small, mediocre souls on such prominent display throughout this crisis.

The outward forms of Christianity would no doubt endure into the new paradigm, its archaic symbols to be put on ostentatious display at lavish museum galas or its antique language dragged out for ceremonial occasions such as royal weddings. But this paradigm can hardly be said to be Christian. A *Christian* faith that does not seek understanding (*credo ut intelligam*) is as inconceivable as one that does not proceed from it (*intelligo ut credam*). Faith in the Creator God, the Word who becomes flesh in Jesus Christ, is inseparable from faith in a transcendent order of nature and universal reason. Christianity cannot be de-Hellenized, therefore, without being de-Christianized at the same time, and Christianity cannot be de-Christianized without an eclipse of the sense of God and man casting its dark shadow over the whole of our thought and life.

The secular world, of course, is not interested in the de-Christianization of Christianity except insofar as it can help expedite the process. Our acquiescence in this process can be measured by the extent to which we adopt this secular perspective and regard this horrible moment as a crisis of abuse, crime, and corruption only, as if a crisis of such world historic significance were of no real theological importance and thinking theologically about it were merely a pretext for political machinations and an insult to the victims. This has the matter exactly backward. In the name of defending the victims, it makes the evil perpetrated against them less significant than it actually is, at least to those for whom God is a reality. The inability to think other than politically is evidence that the eclipse of God has deprived us of the light even to recognize our own atheism.

At the head of the Cross of Christ, the Gospels tell us, was an inscription which read "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews." According to St. John, it was written in Hebrew, Latin, and Greek. What could this detail even mean to our de-Hellenized minds, except perhaps to indicate an early example of sociological "inculturation"? But for the traditional Christian, on whom the ends of the ages had come, and for whom the universe itself is a symbol crying out to us to recognize its Creator, it would have meant much more. It would signify that the whole world was united in judgment under the Cross of Christ in the fullness of time, and that it was precisely in this *Kairos*—which unites the language of true worship, the language of power, and the language of the wise—that God chose to reveal himself. The wisdom of the Greeks could not therefore be adventitious to the meaning of the gospel and to the articulation of Christian faith, as indeed they have never been up till now. The eclipse of this wisdom, of the transcendence of God and nature in modernity and in the contemporary Church, raises once again a question first posed by the Lord Himself: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"