

**Mystical Theology:
A Broad Collection of
Orthodox Theology**

**From the "Major Works"
series**

CJS Hayward

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Table of Contents

Preface	1
That Beautiful Strength	2
Contemplation	12
Creation and Holy Orthodoxy: Fundamentalism Is Not Enough	18
Note to Orthodox Evolutionists: Stop Trying to Retroactively Shanghai Recruit the Fathers to Your Camp!	24
Our Crown of Thorns	34
Dissent: Lessons from Being an Orthodox Theology Student at a Catholic University	37
Exotic Golden Ages and Restoring Harmony with Nature: Anatomy of a Passion	47
God the Game Changer	79
God the Spiritual Father	92
The Horn of Joy: A Meditation on Eternity and Time, Kairos and Chronos	121
How to Survive an Economic Depression	164
On Humor	200
Incarnation and Deification	206
Introduction to the Jesus Prayer	213
Lesser Icons: Reflections: Reflection on Faith, Icons, and Art	218
An Open Letter to Catholics on Orthodoxy and Ecumenism	253
The Pleasure-Pain Syndrome	266

<u>Pride</u>	<u>281</u>
<u>"Religion and Science" Is Not Just Intelligent Design vs. Evolution</u>	<u>294</u>
<u>The Swiss Army Knife and God</u>	<u>333</u>
<u>Take Your Shoes Off Your Feet, for the Place Where You Are Standing Is Holy Ground</u>	<u>339</u>
<u>The Transcendent God Who Approaches Us Through Our Neighbor</u>	<u>350</u>
<u>What Makes Me Uneasy About Fr. Seraphim (Rose) and His Followers</u>	<u>364</u>

Preface

This is an eclectic collection of articles in theology. It covers the beautiful strength that triumphs after a hideous strength that does its worst, our being made to contemplate God, deeper understandings of creation and origins questions, being grateful for the children God gives us, right and wrong handlings of dissent, what's wrong with trying to bring back a golden age, how God changes the game and looks after us as a spiritual father, a farewell to Halloween, surviving in bad economic conditions, humor, Christ being incarnate in us, the very beginnings of the Jesus Prayers, icons and art as lesser icons, monarchy, Catholic ecumenism, our ordinary lives, the link between pleasure and pain, the sin that cast Satan out of Heaven, what more there is to "religion and science" than origins debates, a look at Swiss Army Knives and then God, being purified of sinful thoughts, a God who is infinitely beyond us and infinitely near and approaches us through each person we meet, real and true treasure, and a popular figure who has a troubling following.

That is quite a lot, but the pages turn quickly. You are invited to read from the cornucopia of theology offered here.

That Beautiful Strength

*The Shadow of that hyddeous strength
Sax myle and more it is of length.*

The shadow of that hideous strength
Six miles and more it is of length.

Opening quotation to C.S. Lewis, [That Hideous Strength](#)

[That Hideous Strength](#) is the third book in C.S. Lewis's space trilogy, the other two being [Out of the Silent Planet](#) and [Perelandra](#). [Out of the Silent Planet](#) is the first science fiction book that featured aliens in which the aliens were not a vile monstrosity, but I am not concerned with the science fiction here. [That Hideous Strength](#) has an important Arthurian element, and [while I've written my own take on the Arthurian legends](#), I am not concerned with that here either. And there are other things about [That Hideous Strength](#) that I am also not concerned with.

Then what am I concerned with?

Among programmers there is a slang term "hhos", an abbreviation for "Ha ha, only serious!" It describes, not exactly jokes that aren't really funny, but jokes that aren't really jokes at their core: three of my own examples might

be [Pope Makes Historic Ecumenical Bid to Woo Eastern Rite Catholics](#), [Devotees of Fr. Cherubim \(Thorn\) Demand his Immediate Canonization and Full Recognition as "Equal to the Heirophants"](#), and [Unvera Announces New Kool-Aid Line](#). These pieces fall on to the more "serious" end of "Ha ha, only serious!" And something like "Ha ha, only serious!" is found in [That Hideous Strength](#).

[That Hideous Strength](#) is darker and harder to appreciate than [Out of the Silent Planet](#) or [Perelandra](#), but I've heard people say they appreciate it most of all when they have got into it. The book, as Lewis clearly introduces it in some editions, is "a fairy-tale for grown-ups", and he makes an opening pre-emptive move to explain that the traditional fairy tale begins with once-common themes before moving to the magical: "We do not always notice [the traditional fairy-tale's] method, because the cottages, castles, woodcutters, and petty kings with which a fairy-tale opens have become for us as remote as the witches and ogres to which it progresses." But the traditional fairy-tale begins with the pedestrian John Q. Public and only then moves on to the magical. And Lewis's book begins with "such hum-drum scenes and persons" before moving on to "magicians, devils, pantomime animals, and planetary angels."

But C.S. Lewis's tale is, if not exactly "ha ha, only serious," a prime example of "**ha ha, only realistic**." I do not mean exactly that the figure of Merlin or a Pendragon who has visited other planets is realism; what I *do* mean is that [That Hideous Strength](#) is a tale of a hideous strength and **that hideous strength is realistic and real in our world today**.

Today that hideous strength has bared its power, and I would be very wary of saying the worst is past.

The poem Lewis quotes, "The shadow of that hideous strength / Six miles and more it is of length," is about the Tower of Babel ([Genesis 11:1-13, RSV](#)):

Now the whole earth had one language and few words.

And as men migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly." And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth."

And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men had built. And the LORD said, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; and nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech."

So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Ba'bel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth.

I spent a long time trying to think of how to put this, and perhaps this is one way of explaining. Those of us who [used to play Dungeons & Dragons](#) heard of, and perhaps wanted to play, a race of elves called Drow. The earliest AD&D sources denied or were ambiguous about whether Drow

even existed, and then more and more became known about them. They were a Machiavellian society living deep in caverns beneath the earth; they kept fearsome "mind flayers" (Illithid) as slaves; they possessed weapons and armor of adamantite alloy that was on par with some of the most powerful magical items those on the surface of the earth could have. And these enchanted adamantite armaments were dependent on the magical energies of the Underdark; they needed to spend one week in four immersed in the magical energies flowing around the Underdark, and their enchanted properties would be destroyed completely if they saw the light of the sun. I believe this adamantite gear was what military buffs would call a "capture-proof weapon": weapons and armor that would soon cease to be useful if captured by enemy forces.

I am one of many who succumbed to the temptation to have a really cool watch; the watch I have is a dark green [Casio Pathfinder by Casio](#) and features a barometer/altimeter and compass, and I've used it to navigate. And it features "tough solar" power; I should never need to replace its batteries because it draws power from the sun, making it the opposite of Drow gear... *or maybe not*. I purchased it after a botched battery replacement broke the waterproof seal on an earlier model Pathfinder; I wanted something cooler, so I chose a forest green watch rather than a blue watch, and one that was "atomic", meaning not exactly that it contained a super-exact atomic clock, but that its time would be set to well under one second accuracy by a nightly radio signal in various parts of the world. But my point is not exactly about this magical attunement to energies of the Underdark, but that my watch is a capture-proof weapon. I purchased it to replace a watch I was annoyed at having broke down, and the company that gave me an earlier watch that broke down also gave me a newer watch that will *also* break down. It would probably take a few years to break down, but I do not imagine I have purchased a watch that I can wear for the

rest of a long life.

My newly upgraded iPhone 4 is also capture-proof, dependent on the energies of the Underdark in more ways than one. It needs to be kept charged, and will quickly become useless without a source of power. But 90% of its functionality is lost *immediately* if it loses network functionality. People can and do make iPhone apps that work without network access, but the overall current is to fetch things fresh from the network in a way that is completely useless if network access is not available. And, as a *Popular Mechanics* cover article stated, "Your gadgets spy on you;" my iPhone's GPS is what older science fiction referred to as a tracking device, if it were not enough to have the NSA monitoring phone calls and network usage.

This is just the tip of an iceberg, the outer ornament of a Tower of Babel that is at its heart *not* about technology any more than astronomy is about telescopes or love letters or about ink. This Tower of Babel permeates life and culture. A political ideology is by definition a Tower of Babel. But something is odd even in the technology. Advances of technology in practice mean technologies that are more dependent on Underdark energy, and ultimately more fragile, than "obsolete" technologies they replace. This fragility, this vulnerability is the outer shell in shifts in life and culture that are at the essence of [that hideous strength](#). Only I'm not sure how to untangle the whole of it. Perhaps I don't need to. Perhaps it is enough to say that trouble has been brewing for centuries and it takes a global political and economic meltdown for people to see how hideous it is.

[I'm uneasy about some of the things that seem to come with Fr. Seraphim \(Rose\)'s followers. However, interest in Taoism and the *Tao Te Ching* was also part of how I found my way to Holy Orthodoxy, and a very brief look at \[Christ the Eternal Tao\]\(#\) made it clear that Fr. Seraphim \(as a monastic, he does not need to have 'Rose' repeated\) grasped](#)

Taoism and the *Tao Te Ching* at a deeper level than I did, and in a more organic way. And one of the points I believe Fr. Seraphim nailed is that people were less tangled in Lao Tzu's world than ours, that in some sense Lao Tzu can be placed with Plato as (anonymous) Christians before Christ, and that however fallen Lao Tzu's China may have been, we have fallen further. One head of this hydra is marketing, cognate to manipulation, propaganda, and porn, that basically relates to people as things to be manipulated and not related to as human. One American visited (our day's) China and wondered how the Chinese could stand to be bombarded by such ludicrous propaganda: and then came home with fresh eyes to messages informing her that she would be cooler if she drank Pepsi. Some people have said that branding has taken the place of spiritual discipline in today's world—a professor asked students a question, "Imagine your successful future self," and continued, "With what brands do you imagine yourself associating?" And he received no puzzled stares or social cues that anybody found this a strange question. Branding is powerful; I've mentioned a couple of brands and regard my name-dropping of Casio Pathfinder and the iPhone 4 as ultimately shameful. And this is one tentacle among a thousand; I could elsewhere review some of [Exotic Golden Ages and Restoring Harmony with Nature: Anatomy of a Passion](#), or make a deeper cut and say, "Feminism is anti-woman. No, really. Never mind the marketing image; if you really want to see sparks fly, ask a good, devoted feminist if feminism and gender studies give us human flourishing, and then smile and say, 'You know, I think Phyllis Schlafly is a beautiful example of human flourishing.'" And when you're done ducking for cover, look at another of the many tentacles of today's Tower of Babel (or perhaps many Towers of Babel). Perhaps look at the premise that relationships are a disposable commodity and marriages fall apart at the drop of a hat next to not-particularly-close friendships in bygone ages: and if that is not enough, the

next installment is that relationships are not disposable if someone wants out, but transactional, intended to be dropped fairly quickly even if there is nothing like a falling-out.

Perhaps we do not need to spend too much more time looking into that abyss.

That Beautiful Strength

Fyodor Dostoevsky's [The Brothers Karamazov](#) answers C.S. Lewis's [That Hideous Strength](#).

[The Brothers Karamazov](#) does not discuss anything apocalyptic and predicts no Russian Revolution, but it is eminently concerned with the problem of evil, and two chapters provide two of the most powerful statements of the problem of evil in literature. But after evil has full reign, something good follows in its wake. There is a superficial happy ending when an escape is planned for a man who wounded but did not kill his father, and is convicted of parricide. But that is almost superficial. On a deeper level there is something good that follows the Christlike Alyosha, and evil at the death of a young boy does not have the last word. The book as a whole is painful to read, or I found it such. But its ending is fragrant. It has the fragrance of the resurrection.

The mystery of the resurrection is not only for the consummation of time in the Last Judgment. Heaven is for *now*, and the mystery of the resurrection is for *now*.

This year, on Holy Saturday, I finally got something that I hadn't gotten before, thick as I am. I had begun studying theology and against what seemed insurmountable odds (including studying during treatment for cancer), I earned a master's degree in theology. Then I entered a Ph.D. program at another school to be able to teach at a seminary. I did not complete the program; [you can read my author bio](#)

if you want to see what I've accomplished in other settings, but I washed out of this program in a very painful way. (As in, it was so rough that I found chemotherapy an easier experience.)

What I realized this Sunday was that what prevented me from getting a Ph.D. did not stop God's purposes; it may well enough have thwarted what I *thought* was God's intent, but right now I have a great many blessings to count and am profoundly grateful to God that I am not still working on a Ph.D. program that would have on the average taken eight years to complete and would still not have gotten me a Ph.D. by now. My regrets now are the right and proper regrets that I was angry and I failed to use hardship in an ascetical, spiritually disciplined manner. And I recognize God's wonderful, severe mercy in all of this: I failed to recognize the words of Christ the True Vine: Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. God's hand was powerful enough when several good things that never happen fell into place for me to go a certain distance into academic theology. And it was even more powerful in several bad things that never happen fell into place to keep me from completing my program.

Most of the theology covered was queer, or gender studies, or Marxist, or what have you; but on this point I would recall the words of one flaming liberal theologian who said that Christ's resurrection was not on the same level as his death; it wasn't simply reversing his death so that with Lazarus he was alive in the same way as before. Instead Christ remained, in a certain sense, dead; the marks of death remained with him, but God had the last word. The East does not really have a tradition of saints bearing the stigmata but instead saints who shine with the radiant uncreated Light of Heaven, but even in the East it is clear that the marks of the crucifixion on St. Francis of Assisi are a treasure beyond pearls. Christ was crucified, but this did

not annihilate Christ: instead it annihilated crucifixion. Christ would become the firstborn of the dead: "Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death!" And others have pointed out that Christ did not return to the level of things in his passion and have a petty triumph: he did not return to Pilate and say, "You said, 'What is truth?'" nor return to the Sanhedrin and say, "Are you sure that I am a mere man who blasphemed when you asked me if I was the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" It's not just that Christ wasn't being petty; he was working on another level. The only exception seems to be St. Thomas, who said, "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe." and when Christ took him up on his claim, St. Thomas answered, "My Lord and my God!", confessing infinitely more than Christ's resurrection. Christ triumphed in his fruitful unbelief.

That Hideous Strength describes something that is real and active, but for all the hideous strength of Hell, when evil triumphs, God the changes the game.

That beautiful strength has the last word. The resurrection is not a fundamental exception to how God works; it is the supreme example of a law that plays out on a much smaller scale. An unintended pregnancy can be the gateway for two people to move past living for themselves, and live for something bigger than an egotism of two. And in some ways that is like how, despite all my best efforts to become an official theologian, God has introduced me to theology—the real kind. Not that he doesn't mean others to be a scholar, but to Orthodox scholar and nonscholar alike theology is life; it is for all Orthodox Christians; it is a Heaven that begins on earth, a practice of the virtues and a spiritual walk, and something much bigger than an academic discipline. Even if some Orthodox can and should be practitioners in academic theology. And even if I'm thick enough that it took me years to see this.

That beautiful strength is unconstrained no matter how many cards [that hideous strength](#) plays off the side of the deck. **That beautiful strength** brings Heaven wherever God's saints may be, even in a concentration camp. **That beautiful strength** thrives in losses we consider catastrophic, losses of things we think we need. **That beautiful strength** takes tragedy as the canvas for a masterpiece of beauty, glory, and wonder. **That beautiful strength** fixes the root problems despite all our efforts to fix things ourselves. **That beautiful strength**, however deep the magic of that hideous strength may be, is of a deeper magic from beyond the bounds of time. **That beautiful strength** took the marks of the lowest death, the crucifixion of a disobedient slave, and made them more precious than rubies and pearls. **That beautiful strength** takes sinners and makes them saints. **That beautiful strength** will someday hear the praises of the mute, be heard by the deaf, and be seen by the blind, but it is a strength that is alive and well and works its power and wonder today.

[That Hideous Strength](#) is alive and powerful, but it need never be the last word.

Contemplation

Enjoying something from legal English

A lawyer, one Dr. Sandburg, wrote [The Legal Guide to Mother Goose](#), doing his professional best to rewrite "Jack and Jill went up the hill" with the full precision of a legal document:

The party of the first part hereinafter known as
Jack
And the party of the second part hereinafter
known as Jill
Ascended or caused to be ascended
An elevation of undetermined height and slope
Hereinafter referred to as hill,

And it must be conceded that the English of legal documents is rarely held up as an example of how to communicate to people without extensive legal training. However, there is one point where we would do well to pay close attention to legal English.

"Enjoy" is a word frequently used in contracts, appearing like:

4. _____ will enjoy an unlimited right to sell, redistribute, publish, make derivative works to...

And "enjoy" means something that is alike powerful and beautiful here. It does not mean—one is tempted to say "has nothing to do with"—an agreement that someone will have pleasure. Contracts like this, even when they say "enjoy", really do not have much to say about how much fun and pleasure either party will take from the agreement. "Enjoy" is a technical term that means something like "derive the full benefits from", so that:

4. _____ will **enjoy** an unlimited right to sell, redistribute, publish, make derivative works to...

means something like:

4. _____ will **derive the full benefits from** an unlimited right to sell, redistribute, publish, make derivative works to...

And with that view in mind, let's take a look at the opening question of the Westminster Catechism:

Q: 1. What is the chief end of man?

A: Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

"Enjoy" may here include taking delight from God, but I would like to point something out. In this famous catechism, what is enjoyed is not a legal right. (For that matter, [Orthodoxy can get along quote well without the Western obsession with rights.](#)) What is enjoyed is not a legal right such as contracts deal in, but God himself.

"Mission exists because worship does not."

There is something in Protestant missions I would like to look at and then deepen.

Among devout Protestants who care most deeply about mission, there is a saying, "Mission exists because worship does not." The premise of this emphatic saying is that God has never created anyone for the purpose of missions. Every man who ever has been created has been created for one goal only: worshiping God. Or in the language of the catechism, "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him together." And some are quick to point out that these are not two separate things: glorifying God and enjoying him are the exact same thing. No one is created for mission; everyone is created for worship. But there is a tragic reality. Some people are not in a position to fulfill the purpose for which they are made. And because some people are deprived of the glorious worship they are made for, and there is this gap in worship, the Christian Church as a whole, and some Christians in particular, should serve in missions.

There are differences between Orthodox and Protestant understandings of mission: Protestant training, such as Wheaton College's *Institute for Cross-Cultural Training*, give a kickstart in both anthropology and linguistics, training people to learn languages and communicate well in cross-cultural situations. The Orthodox history of missions does not ignore language or culture, but its best mission work is to have monks who are trained in holiness go out among people and let their holiness itself speak. If one reads of a St. Herman of Alaska, whose mission work is still bearing fruit in Alaska today, the story is overall not of an endeavor to understand language and culture, but of a man pouring himself out in love for God and having successful

missionary activity precisely because he followed the maxim, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his perfect righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you as well." I've attended courses at Wheaton's *Institute for Cross-Cultural Training* and every person I spoke with was devout. But the content of the training itself, focused on language and culture, is by Orthodox standards a secular idea of how to succeed as a missionary. The Orthodox idea that the best missionary is a monk pursuing holiness as fully as he can, and that missions work when you live among people and seek first the Kingdom of God.

Ascesis exists because contemplation does not

Ascesis, meaning the spiritual disciplines of the Orthodox walk, means an open-ended list that includes prayer, fasting, church attendance, giving to the poor, spiritual stillness, and other things. It is profoundly important in Orthodoxy. But in an even stronger sense than we can say, "Mission exists because worship does not," we can say, "Ascesis exists because contemplation does not." And the observation here is not that there are others who are missing the glory they were made to share. The observation is that we have fallen short of the glory we were made to share, and we need the purifying fire of ascesis. We and others need ascesis, but this is the point. We were not created for ascetical toil. We need ascesis because we have fallen away from the contemplation we were made for, the contemplation which is another name for enjoying God.

And I have wanted to speak of contemplation but find myself falling short. Of our sins and our need to be polished in ascesis it is easy to say something adequate. But for contemplation, words fail me, or at least my command of words. Contemplation is a joy and other things pale in

comparison next to it: yet even to speak of it as a joy is misleading, as misleading as reading a contract and think that "enjoy" means nothing more than assuring that someone will experience pleasure. Better, perhaps, is to say that I thirst for honor, I want worldly accolades and am too ungrateful to be satisfied with the worldly honors I have. But when I taste contemplation, such honors grow strangely dim and I find myself wanting what is really good for me, thirsting and sated for real honor, real achievement, real love of others, and the debris I chase after in temptation looks like... in [Silence: Organic Food for the Soul](#) I wrote:

...is that we are like a child with some clay,
 trying to satisfy ourselves by making a clay horse,
 with clay that never cooperates, never looks
 right,
 and obsessed with clay that is never good
 enough,
 we ignore and maybe fear
 the finger tapping us on our shoulder
 until with great trepidation we turn,
 and listen to the voice say,
 "Stop trying so hard. Let it go,"
 and follow our father
 as he gives us a warhorse.

And so I am left saying that enjoying God in contemplation is beautiful beyond beauty, and words fail me, and ideas too. I want to tell of God and contemplation above all else, and nothing I can say fits them.

Enjoying apples

Apples are a powerful symbol in Orthodoxy. It is not just that the Song of Songs has a lovesick bride say, "Refresh me with apples." Apples appear again and again in [the spiritual treasure housed in the lives of the saints](#). The saints are

refreshed with apples; a priest prays to see what paradise is like, and St. Euphrosynos appears to him in a dream and invites him to take whatever he desires. He chose three apples, and the cook Euphrosynos wrapped them up. The priest awoke from the dream and was astonished to find three apples, wrapped as they had been in the vision, fragrant beyond all measure. (When he told what happened, the cook ran to flee from worldly honor.) Another story tells of an abbess, at the end of her life, being given three apples from paradise. It is perhaps a reminiscence of this that in *The Magician's Nephew*, Digory is sorely tempted to steal a Heavenly apple, comes clean about his covetousness, is told of all the evils that would have flown, and then to his astonishment is commanded to take such an apple as he desired to his ailing mother. And he returns home from Narnia and its garden:

...so the fruit of that mountain garden looked different too. There were of course all sorts of coloured things in the bedroom: the coloured counterpane on the bed, the wallpaper, the sunlight from the window, and Mother's pretty, pale blue dressing jacket. But the moment Digory took the Apple out of his pocket, all those things seemed to have scarcely any colour at all. Every one of them, even the sunlight, looked faded and dingy. The brightness of the Apple threw strange lights on the ceiling. Nothing else was worth looking at: you couldn't look at anything else. And the smell of the Apple of Youth was as if there was a window that opened on Heaven.

Such apples are no concoction that began in a fantasy writer's imagination, however creative. There are saints who have tasted them. But what makes the apple so astonishing is that **such apples are a bit like contemplation.**

Creation and Holy Orthodoxy: Fundamentalism Is Not Enough

Against (crypto-Protestant) "Orthodox" fundamentalism

If you read Genesis 1 and believe from Genesis 1 that the world was created in six days, I applaud you. That is a profound thing to believe in simplicity of faith.

However, if you wish to persuade me that Orthodox Christians should best believe in a young earth creation in six days, I am wary. *Every single time* an Orthodox Christian has tried to convince me that I should believe in a six day creation, I have been given recycled Protestant arguments, and for the moment the entire conversation has seemed like I was talking with a Protestant fundamentalist dressed up in Orthodox clothing. And if the other person claims to understand scientific data better than scientists who believe an old earth, and show that the scientific data instead support a *young* earth, this is a major red flag.

Now at least some Orthodox heirarchs have refused to decide for the faithful under their care what the faithful may believe: the faithful may be expected to believe God's hand was at work, but between young earth creationism, old earth creationism, and "God created life through evolution", or any other options, the heirarchs do not intervene. I am an old earth creationist; I came to my present beliefs on "How did different life forms appear?" before becoming Orthodox, and I have called them into a question a few times but not yet found reason to revise them, either into young earth creation or theistic evolution. I would characterize my beliefs, after being reconsidered, as "not changed", *and not* "decisively confirmed": what I would suggest has improved in my beliefs is that I have become less interested in some Western fascinations, such as getting right the details of how the world was created, moving instead to what might be called "mystical theology" or "practical theology", and walking the Orthodox Way.

There is something that concerns me about Orthodox arguing young earth creationism like a Protestant fundamentalist. Is it that I think they are wrong about how the world came to be? *That is not the point*. If they are wrong about that, they are wrong in the company of excellent saints. If they merely hold another position in a dispute, that is one thing, but bringing Protestant fundamentalism into the Orthodox Church reaches beyond one position in a dispute. Perhaps I shouldn't be talking because I reached my present position before entering the Orthodox Church; or rather I haven't exactly *reversed* my position but de-emphasized it and woken up to the fact that there are bigger things out there. But I am concerned when I'm talking with an Orthodox Christian, and *every single time* someone tries to convince me of a young earth creationism, all of the sudden it seems like I'm not dealing with an Orthodox Christian any more, but with a Protestant fundamentalist who always includes arguments that came

from Protestant fundamentalism. And what concerns me is an issue of *practical* theology. Believing in a six day creation is one thing. Believing in a six day creation like a Protestant fundamentalist is another matter *entirely*.

A telling, telling line in the sand

In reading the Fathers, one encounters claims of a young earth. However, often (if not always) the claim is one among many disputes with Greek philosophers or what have you. To my knowledge there is no patristic text in which a young earth is *the* central claim, let alone even approach being "the article by which the Church stands or falls" (if I may borrow phrasing from Protestant fundamentalist cultural baggage).

But, you may say, Genesis 1 and some important Fathers said six days, literally. True enough, but may ask a counterquestion?

Are we obligated to believe that our bodies are composed of earth, air, fire and water, and not of molecules and atoms including carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen?

If that question seems to come out of the blue, let me quote St. Basil, *On the Six Days of Creation*, on a precursor to today's understanding of the chemistry of what everyday objects are made of:

Others imagined that atoms, and indivisible bodies, molecules and bonds, form, by their union, the nature of the visible world. Atoms reuniting or separating, produce births and deaths and the most durable bodies only owe their consistency to the strength of their mutual adhesion: a true spider's web woven by these writers who give to heaven, to earth, and to sea so weak an origin and so little consistency! It is because they knew not how to say "In the

beginning God created the heaven and the earth." Deceived by their inherent atheism it appeared to them that nothing governed or ruled the universe, and that was all was given up to chance.

At this point, belief in his day's closest equivalent to our atoms and molecules is called an absolutely unacceptable "spider's web" that is due to "inherent atheism." Would you call Orthodox Christians who believe in chemistry's molecules and atoms inherent atheists? St. Basil does provide an alternative:

"And the Spirit of God was borne upon the face of the waters." Does this spirit mean the diffusion of air? The sacred writer wishes to enumerate to you the elements of the world, to tell you that God created the heavens, the earth, water, and air and that the last was now diffused and in motion; or rather, that which is truer and confirmed by the authority of the ancients, by the Spirit of God, he means the Holy Spirit.

St. Basil rejected atoms and molecules, and believed in elements, not of carbon or hydrogen, but of earth, air, fire, and water. The basic belief is one Orthodoxy understands, and there are sporadic references in liturgical services to the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water, and so far as I know no references to modern chemistry. St. Basil seems clearly enough to endorse a six day creation, and likewise endorses an ancient view of elements while rejecting belief in atoms and molecules as implicit atheism.

Why then do Orthodox who were once Protestant fundamentalists dig their heels in at a literal six day creation and make no expectation that we dismiss chemistry to believe the elements are earth, air, fire, water, and possibly aether? The answer, so far as I can tell, has

nothing whatsoever to do with Orthodoxy or any Orthodox Christians. It has to do with a line in the sand chosen by Protestants, the same line in the sand described in [Why Young Earthers Aren't Completely Crazy](#), a line in the sand that is understandable and was an attempt to address quite serious concerns, but still should not be imported from Protestant fundamentalism into Holy Orthodoxy.

Leaving Western things behind

If you believe in a literal six day creation, it is not my specific wish to convince you to drop that belief. But I would have you drop fundamentalist Protestant "creation science" and its efforts to prove a young earth scientifically and show that it can interpret scientific findings better than the mainstream scientific community. And I would have you leave Western preoccupations behind. Perhaps you might believe St. Basil was right about six literal days. For that matter, you could believe he was right about rejecting atoms and molecules in favor of earth, air, fire, and water—or at least recognize that St. Basil makes *other* claims *besides* six literal days. But you might realize that really there are much more important things in the faith. Like how faith plays out in practice.

The fundamentalist idea of conversion is like flipping a light switch: one moment, a room is dark, then in an instant it is full of light. The Orthodox understanding is of *transformation*: discovering Orthodoxy is the work of a lifetime, and perhaps once a year there is a "falling off a cliff" experience where you realize you've missed something big about Orthodoxy, and you need to grow in that newly discovered dimension. Orthodoxy is not just the ideas and enthusiasm we have when we first come into the Church; there are big things we could never dream of and big things we could never consider we needed to repent of. And I would rather pointedly suggest that if a new convert's

understanding of Orthodoxy is imperfect, much less of Orthodoxy can be understood from reading Protestant attacks on it. One of the basic lessons in Orthodoxy is that you understand Orthodoxy by walking the Orthodox Way, by attending the services and living a transformed life, and not by reading books. And if this goes for books written by Orthodox saints, it goes all the more for Protestant fundamentalist books attacking Orthodoxy.

Science won't save your soul, but science (like Orthodoxy) is something you understand by years of difficult work.

Someone who has done that kind of work might be able to argue effectively that evolution does not account for the fossil record, let alone how the first organism could come to exist: but here I would recall *The Abolition of Man*: "It is Paul, the Pharisee, the man 'perfect as touching the Law' who learns where and how that Law was deficient."

Someone who has taken years of effort may rightly criticize evolution for its scientific merits. Someone who has just read fundamentalist Protestant attacks on evolution and tries to evangelize evolutionists and correct their scientific errors *will be just as annoying to an atheist who believes in evolution*, as a fundamentalist who comes to evangelize the unsaved Orthodox and "knows all about Orthodoxy" from polemical works written by other fundamentalists. I would rather pointedly suggest that if you care about secular evolutionists at all, pray for them, but don't set out to untangle their backwards understanding of the science of it all. If you introduce yourself as someone who will straighten out their backwards ideas about science, all you may really end up accomplishing is to push them away.

Conversion is a slow process. And letting go of Protestant approaches to creation may be one of those moments of "falling off a cliff."

Note to Orthodox Evolutionists

Stop Trying to Retroactively Shanghai Recruit the Fathers to Your Camp!

At least some bishops explicitly allow their faithful flock to believe theistic evolution, young earth creation, or any of several other options.

This article is not meant to say you can't be Orthodox and believe in evolution. It is, however, meant to say that you can't be Orthodox and misrepresent Church Fathers as saying things more convenient to evolution than what they really said.

Two examples of a telling symptom: Fishy, suspicious arguments

Alexander Kalomiros is perhaps a forerunner to Orthodox finding a profound harmony between the Church Fathers

and evolution. To pick one of many examples, Kalomiros's [On the Six Days of Creation](#) cites St. Basil the Great as saying, "Therefore, if you say a day or an age, you express the same meaning" (homily 2 of St. Basil's *On the Six Days of Creation*). So Dr. Kalamiros cites St. Basil as clearly saying that "day" is a term with a rather elastic meaning, implying an indefinite length.

Something really piqued my curiosity, because a young earth Creationist cited the same saint, the same book, and even the same homily as Kalamiros, but as supporting the opposite conclusion: "one day" means "one day," period.

I honestly wondered, "Why on earth?" Why would the same text be cited as a proof-text for "days" of quite open-ended length, but also a proof text for precise twenty-four hour days? So I read [the homily of St. Basil that was in question](#). The result?

The young earther's claim is easier to explain: St. Basil does, in fact, quite plainly claim a young earth, and treats this belief as non-negotiable. And what Kalomiros cites? The text is talking about something else when St. Basil moves from discussing the Creation to matters of eternity and the Last Judgment. One of the names for eternity is "the eighth day," and in explaining the timelessness of eternity, St. Basil writes, "Thus whether you call it day, or whether you call it eternity, you express the same idea." Which is not exactly how Kalomiros quotes him, not *exactly*.

Kalomiros offers a quote out of context, and translates in a subtle but misleading wording, leading the reader to believe St. Basil clarified that a "day" [of Creation] can just as well be an "age" [of time]. This is sophistry. This is disingenuous. What is more, I cannot ever remember following one of Kalomiros's footnotes supporting evolution and find an appropriate and responsible use of the original text. When I check things out, little if any of it checks out. And that's a concern. When someone argues like that, the

reader is being treated dishonestly, and deceptive argument is rarely the herald of truth.

Let me quote another of many examples celebrating a harmony between patristic Orthodoxy and evolution, Vladimir de Beer's [Genesis, Creation and Evolution](#). He writes:

The account of creation in the first chapter of Genesis is known as the *Hexaemeron* (Greek for 'six days'), on which a number of Greek and Latin Church fathers wrote commentaries. Some of them interpreted the six days of creation quite literally, like St Basil the Great who was much influenced by Aristotle's natural philosophy. Yet the same Cappadocian father insisted that the scriptural account of creation is not about science, and that there is no need to discuss the essence (ousias) of creation in its scientific sense. [1] Others followed a more allegorical approach, such as St Gregory of Nyssa who saw the *Hexaemeron* as a philosophy of the soul, with the perfected creature as the final goal of evolution.

It has been my experience that for a certain kind of author one of the cheapest ways to dismiss a Father is to say that they were heavily influenced by some kind of non-Orthodox philosophy. Usually they don't even give a footnote. *St. Basil the Great is a Church Father and one of the Three Hierarchy*, and if you are going to downplay whether his position is one we should believe, you should be doing a lot more than due diligence than making a dismissive bare assertion that he was heavily influenced by non-Orthodox forces.

But at least de Beer is kind enough to allow St. Basil to believe in six literal days. I am rather mystified by his treatment of St. Gregory of Nyssa, [whose commentary On](#)

[the Six Days of Creation is here](#). Are we referring to the same work?

St. Gregory's commentary is not a allegorical interpretation, such as St. Maximus the Confessor's way of finding allegory about ascesis and ascetical struggles in the details of the Gospel. It is if anything 90% a science lesson, or an Aristotelian science lesson at any rate, and at face value St. Gregory owes much more of a debt to Aristotle than St. Basil does. (At *least* St. Gregory spends vastly more time talking about earth, air, fire, and water.) St. Gregory's [On the Six Days of Creation](#) assumes and asserts that the days of Creation were, in fact, literal days. And that's not the end. St. Gregory of Nyssa explicitly ascribes the highest authority and weight to St. Basil's work and would almost certainly be astonished to find his work treated as a *corrective* to St. Basil's problematically literal *On the Six Days of Creation*; St. Gregory's attitude appears to be, "St. Basil made an excellent foundation and I want to build on it!" On all counts I can tell, St. Gregory does **not** provide a precedent for treating young earth creation as negotiable. De Beers may well have a friend among the Fathers, but St. Gregory is not that friend. And if this is his choice of friends, maybe he isn't aware of many real, honest friends among the Fathers. St. Augustine may be his friend here, but if the Blessed Augustine is your only friend among the Fathers, you're on pretty shaky ground.

Examples could easily be multiplied, but after a point it becomes somewhat tedious checking out more harmonizers' footnotes and finding that, no indeed, they don't check out.

Why it matters

Have you read much [creation science seeking to use science to prove a young earth?](#) The reason I'm asking is that *that's what scholars do when they use patristic resources to*

prove that Orthodoxy and evolution are in harmony. The kind of distortion of facts that they wouldn't be caught dead in origins science is the kind of distortion of facts that is routine in those harmonizing Orthodoxy with evolution.

I wrote [a thesis calling to task a Biblical Egalitarian treatment of the Haustafel in Ephesians](#), and it is part of my research and experience to believe that sophistry matters, *because sophistry is how people seek to persuade when truth is against them.* And when I see misrepresentation of sources, that betrays a problem.

I myself do not believe in a young earth; I am an old earth creationist and have seriously entertained returning to belief in theistic evolution. I stand pretty much as far outside the patristic consensus as Orthodox evolutionists. **But I don't distort the Fathers to shanghai recruit them to my position.**

It may well be that with knowledge that wasn't available to St. Gregory and his fellow Fathers, the intellectual dishonesty and distortion needed to believe in a young earth may be greater than saying, "I know the Fathers' consensus and I remain outside of it." That's not ideal, but it is infinitely better than distorting the Fathers' consensus to agree with you.

It is better by far to acknowledge that you are outside the Fathers' consensus than make them agree with you. **If you are an Orthodox evolutionist, please stop shanghaiing recruiting ancient Fathers to your camp.**

A helpful analogy: What are the elements?

Some Protestants made young-earth creationism almost "the article by which the Church stands or falls," and much of young-earth and old-earth creationism in Orthodoxy,

and evolution, is shaped by that Protestant "article by which the Church stands or falls."

Today's young-earth creationism and theistic evolution are merely positions on a ballot in single-issue voting, and single-issue voting that was unknown to the Fathers. There are other issues.

(What other issues are there, you ask?)

Let me give my standard question in dealing with young-earth Orthodox who are being pests and perhaps insinuating that my Orthodoxy is impaired if I don't believe their position: "Are we obligated to believe that the elements are earth, air, fire, water, and maybe aether?"

If that question seems to come from out of the blue, let me explain:

St. Basil's *On the Six Days of Creation* takes a position we can relate to readily enough even if we disagree:

"And the evening and the morning were the first day." Evening is then the boundary common to day and night; and in the same way morning constitutes the approach of night to day... Why does Scripture say "one day the first day"? Before speaking to us of the second, the third, and the fourth days, would it not have been more natural to call that one the first which began the series? If it therefore says "one day," it is from a wish to determine the measure of day and night, and to combine the time that they contain. Now twenty-four hours fill up the space of one day—we mean of a day and of a night; and if, at the time of the solstices, they have not both an equal length, the time marked by Scripture does not the less circumscribe their duration. It is as though it said: twenty-four hours measure the space of a day, or that, in reality a day is the time that the

heavens starting from one point take to return there.

That's on our radar. What's not on our radar is how bluntly St. Basil treats his day's closest equivalent to modern chemistry, and please note that alchemy has nothing to do with this; he does not condemn alchemy as being occult, but *chemistry* as atheistic:

Others imagined that atoms, and indivisible bodies, molecules and [bonds], form, by their union, the nature of the visible world. Atoms reuniting or separating, produce births and deaths and the most durable bodies only owe their consistency to the strength of their mutual adhesion: a true spider's web woven by these writers who give to heaven, to earth, and to sea so weak an origin and so little consistency! It is because they knew not how to say "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." Deceived by their inherent atheism it appeared to them that nothing governed or ruled the universe, and that was all was given up to chance.

The emphatic alternative he offers is a belief in the four or five elements, earth, air, fire, water, and possibly the aether. This is something he finds in Genesis:

"And the Spirit of God was borne upon the face of the waters." Does this spirit mean the diffusion of air? The sacred writer wishes to enumerate to you the elements of the world, to tell you that God created the heavens, the earth, water, and air and that the last was now diffused and in motion; or rather, that which is truer and confirmed by the authority of the ancients, by the Spirit of God, he means the Holy Spirit.

St. Basil takes the text to mean more than just that water exists; he takes it to mean that water is an element. Nor is St. Basil the only one to make such claims; as mentioned earlier, [St. Gregory's On the Six Days of Creation](#) is not in the business of condemning opposing views, but it not only assumes literal days for Creation, but the "science" of earth, air, fire, and water is writ large, and someone wishing to understand how ancients could see science and cosmology on those terms has an invaluable resource in [St. Basil's On the Six Days of Creation](#). Furthermore, the view of the four elements is ensconced in Orthodox liturgy: the Vespers for Theophany, which is arguably the central text for Orthodox understanding of Creation, enumerates earth, air, fire, and water as the four elements. To my knowledge, no Orthodox liturgy ensconces the implicit atheism of modern chemistry.

What are we to make of this? Does this mean that modern chemistry is off-limits to Orthodox, and that Orthodox doctors should only prescribe such drugs as the ancient theory would justify? God forbid! I bring this point up to say that the obvious answer is, "Ok, there is a patristic consensus and I stand outside of it," *and that this answer can be given without shanghaiing recruiting the Fathers to endorse modern chemistry*. When science and astronomy were formed, someone was reported to say, "The Bible is a book about how to go to Heaven, not a book about how the Heavens go," and while it may be appropriate to say "On pain of worse intellectual dishonesty, I must accept an old earth and chemistry as worth my provisional assent," it is not appropriate to distort the Church Fathers into giving a rubber stamp to beliefs they would reject.

[Drawing a line in the sand at a young earth is a Protestant invention that has nothing to do with Orthodoxy](#), but casting the opposite vote of theistic evolution in a single-issue vote is *also* short of the Orthodox tradition. In reading the Fathers, one encounters claims of a young earth. However, often (if not always) the claim is one among many

disputes with Greek philosophers or what have you. To my knowledge there is no patristic text in which a young earth is **the** central claim, let alone even approach being "the article by which the Church stands or falls." Single-issue voting here, *even for evolution*, is not an Orthodox phenomenon except as it has washed in from Protestant battle lines. If an Orthodox who questions the Orthodoxy of old-earthers is being (crypto-)Protestant, the Orthodox who cites the Fathers in favor of evolution is only slightly less so —and both distort the truth.

The young-earth Creation Science makes scientific evidence bow before its will. The Orthodox evolutionist makes the Church Fathers bow before his will. Which is the more serious offense? ["Religion and Science" Is Not Just Intelligent Design vs. Evolution.](#)

"When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me."

One Protestant friend said that I had a real knack for insulting analogies. The comment came after I said of mainstream Evangelical "Christian art" that it worked on the same communication principle as hard porn: "Make every point with a sledgehammer and leave nothing to the imagination but the plot." And I have used that ability here: I have said that Orthodox evolutionists writing of harmony between evolution and the Church Fathers are treating patristic texts the same way creation scientists treat scientific evidence. *Ouch*. The Orthodox-evolutionary harmonizers are playing the same single-issue politics game as their young-earth counterparts, and are only different by casting the opposite vote. **Ouch**.

Is there a method to this madness?

I cannot forbid origins questions altogether, for reasons not least of which I am not tonsured even as a reader, let alone

being your heirarch or priest. At least some heirarchs have refused to decide for their flock what they may believe: perhaps people are expected to find God's hand at work in creation, but the exact mechanism of involvement, and time frame, are not decided. But I could wish something like the theology surrounding the holy mysteries, where in contrast to the detailed, point by point Roman account, the Orthodox Church simply says that at one point in the Divine Liturgy the gifts are only (blessed) bread and wine, and at a certain later point they have become the body and blood of Christ, and beyond that point speculation is not allowed.

There are some questions where having the right answer is less valuable than not asking the question at all. Origins questions in the scientific sense do not loom large in the Fathers, and what little there is appears not to match scientific data. But this is not a defect in the Fathers. It is, if anything, a cue that our society's preoccupation with science is not particularly Orthodox in spirit, and perhaps something that doesn't belong in Orthodoxy. Again, [Religion and Science Is Not Just Intelligent Design vs. Evolution.](#)

But for the interim, for people who need an answer and are good enough scientists to see through Creation Science, please do not shanghai recruit the Church Fathers to rubber stamp the present state of scientific speculation. For starters, science is less important than you may think. *But that's just for starters.*

Our Crown of Thorns

I remember meeting a couple; the memory is not entirely pleasant. Almost the first thing they told me after being introduced was that their son was "an accident," and this was followed by telling me how hard it was to live their lives as they wanted when he was in the picture.

I do not doubt that they had no intent of conceiving a child, nor do I doubt that having their little boy hindered living their lives as they saw fit. But when I heard this, I wanted to almost scream to them that they should look at things differently. It was almost as if I was speaking with someone bright who had gotten a full ride scholarship to an excellent university, and was vociferously complaining about how much work the scholarship would require, and how cleanly it would cut them off from what they took for granted in their home town.

I did not think, at the time, about the boy as an icon of the Holy Trinity, not made by hands, or what it means to think of such an *icon* as "an accident." I was thinking mainly about a missed opportunity for growth. What I wanted to say was, "This boy was given to you for your deification! Why must you look on the means of your deification as a curse?"

Marriage and monasticism are opposites in many ways. But there are profound ways in which they provide the same thing, and not only by including a community. Marriage and monasticism both provide—in quite different ways—an opportunity to take up your cross and follow Christ, to grow into the I Corinthians 13 love that says, "When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me"—words that are belong in this hymn to love because love does not place its own desires at the center, but lives for something more. Those who are mature in love put the childish ways of living for themselves behind them, and love Christ through those others who are put in their lives. In marriage this is not just Hollywood-style exhilaration; on this point I recall words I heard from an older woman, that you don't know understand being in love when you're "a kid;" being in love is what you have when you've been married for decades. Hollywood promises a love that is about having your desires fulfilled; I did not ask that woman about what more there is to being in love, but it struck me as both beautiful and powerful that the one thing said by to me by an older woman, grieving the loss of her husband, was that there is much more to being in love than what you understand when you are young enough that marriage seems like a way to satisfy your desires.

Marriage is not just an environment for children to grow up; it is also an environment for parents to grow up, and it does this as a crown of thorns.

The monastic crown of thorns includes an obedience to one's elder that is meant to be difficult. There would be some fundamental confusion in making that obedience optional, to give monastics more control and make things less difficult. The problem is not that it would fail to make a more pleasant, and less demanding, option than absolute obedience to a monastic elder. The problem is that when it was making things more pleasant and less demanding, it would break the spine of a lifegiving struggle—which is

almost exactly what contraception promises.

Rearing children is not required of monastics, and monastic obedience is not required married faithful. But the spiritual struggle, the crown of thorns by which we take up our cross and follow Christ, by which we die to ourselves that we live in Christ, is not something we can improve our lives by escaping. The very thing we can escape by contraception, is what *all* of us—married, monastic, or anything else—need. The person who needs monastic obedience to be a crown of thorns is not the elder, but the monastic under obedience. Obedience is no more a mere aid to one's monastic elder than our medicines are something to help our doctors. There is some error in thinking that some people will be freed to live better lives, if they can have marriage, but have it on their own terms, "a la carte."

What contraception helps people flee is a spiritual condition, a sharpening, a struggle, a proving grounds and a training arena, that all of us need. There is life in death. We find a rose atop the thorns, and the space which looks like a constricting prison from the outside, has the heavens' vast expanse once we view it from the inside. It is rather like the stable on Christmas' day: it looks on the outside like a terrible little place, but on the inside it holds a Treasure that is greater than all the world. But we need first to give up the illusion of living our own lives, and "practice dying" each day, dying to our ideas, our self-image, our self-will, having our way and our sense that the world will be better if we have our way—or even that we will be better if we have our way. Only when we have given up the illusion of living our own lives... will we be touched by the mystery and find ourselves living God's own life.

Dissent: Lessons From Being an Orthodox Theology Student at a Catholic University

Where to take our bearings: A telling starting point

I enrolled in a Ph.D. program in historical theology at a Catholic university. Part of this program was a seminar with various readings to help us get oriented to what history is and how we should approach it. One of the first readings, possibly the first, was Stafford Poole's [History versus Juan Diego](#) (PDF).

The article had the ring of truth as far as the story it sketched out, but it is quite a grave matter to tell budding historical theologians that this is the sort of thing that should orient their study of history and historical theology.

The article raises grave concerns about the very existence of a major figure in Mexican piety and nationalism; the comparable equivalent as far as U.S. nationalism to go

would be to uncover good reasons why we should believe that neither Thomas Jefferson nor Benjamin Franklin ever existed, and the only "evidence" that anyone believed in either of these men before the Civil War was a complete forgery. The lay faithful and clergy who disagreed with the author come across like the Three Stooges.

The article may have been appropriate in itself, and in this case the historian may have legitimately been a figure like the little boy who saw that the emperor had no clothes. But to enshrine this article in a seminar meant to give an orientation to history is another matter entirely, and paints the inspiring, romantic image of the heroic, noble historian who delves past popular piety and the decisions of clergy up to and including the Pope, heroically rips apart a cherished fixture that neither the faithful nor Church officials are noble or brave enough to question, and his trust is shamefully betrayed by the Vatican.

Making *this* a paradigm example of how a historian should interact with Church hierarchy and popular piety is like holding up, so people can get their bearings, a singularly improbable story about how someone, who was drunk, blindly shot a gun into a building and hit a fire extinguisher, putting out a deadly fire and saving several lives. The problem is not so much the original event, but the fact that the extremely unusual story is being used to give the impression that it is a good idea to get drunk and randomly shoot guns around in a city.

Even aside from classes taught by Catholic dissidents, the question of dissent loomed large in a class on "The Profession of Faith," in which Rome asked some professors to be basically faithful to Catholic teaching. One of the questions was: If a Catholic scholar through research comes to a conclusion that seems to contradict what the Church teaches, *and* further communication and research clarifies that there is an irreconcilable difference between the

scholar's findings and the Church officials' position, what should the scholar do? In the context of the class, with the examples and distinctions we had been asked to consider, this almost meant, "If this happens, how much pressure may the scholar appropriately use to bring the Catholic Church to accept his research, and what kinds of pressure are or are not appropriate?" And the professor was very gracious when I offered a different answer to the question of what a scholar should do: "It should be handled pastorally."

My response was received very kindly, and welcomed as a breath of fresh air, but it was completely different from anything I had heard in the class up to that point. In the midst of discussing what scholars should do if their research collides with the Church, no one seemed to even consider the possibility that the discrepancy could be handled pastorally on the part of the researcher.

Thinking in terms of "private doubts"

There is a big difference between having a doubt and pressuring the Church to agree with you, and having a doubt which was handled pastorally. I remember one conversation with my godfather, who was complaining about people broadcasting their doubts in the fashion of a dissident theologian, and he saw this as a major problem. But he liked what I suggested about "private doubts," meaning doubts that were handled pastorally and privately, struggled with, and brought to confession.

As far as "private doubt" is concerned, if you need to privately struggle to believe the deity of Christ, or the Church's teaching on some aspect of sexuality, *fine*. It may not exactly be *good*, but people bring all kinds of sin to confession, and if an Orthodox Christian has doubts in light of scholarly study, this is no more unforgivable than any

other sin that gets obliterated in confession. Doubts may be unfortunate, but if these doubts are handled as *private* doubts and dealt with pastorally, this is not the world's biggest problem.

This point is why I was somewhat puzzled at journalists making a big to-do over the public announcement that Mother Theresa had painful doubts about God's existence. (Some asked if she was really a crypto-atheist.) I was underwhelmed at the revelation and wanted to ask, "*So?!?*" We might have sympathy for her difficult spiritual struggle, but she evidently treated her doubts as *private* doubts, brought them to confession, and still served God in love to her neighbor. That is about as much as one can ask.

Are scholars' difficulties really *that* different?

This is related to why I am a bit bothered when someone who reads the Bible devotionally shows respect to a scholar by saying that his own Bible study is just lightweight and insignificant, but the scholar with access to historical sources is doing the real, serious Bible study. It may be great if they can be humble and out of their humility respect the work of scholars, but the Bible is given by God for devotional use and it is backwards to say that the devout layman reading the Bible is making a flimsy and insubstantial study next to the serious work of scholars. I've seen a lot of methodical scholarship that is not nearly as interesting as the devotional reading of common people, and in theology it is simply not true that scholarship is the industrial strength tool to really understand things.

I know that it may appear plausible, even obvious, to place scholarship in a separate category as far as doubt and dissent goes from doubts among the rest of the faithful. But my own experience casts doubt on this. I may have seen

liberal Catholics doubting the Vatican's condemnation of contraception. I do not remember if I have ever read a dissident who tried to fairly understand theological and historical sources and come to their dissident position even though they tried very hard to give their Church's official position the benefit of the doubt. The invariable trend is to write something that sounds like people who want contraception for the same reason most moderns want contraception, and then Shanghai whatever academic resources they can force to back them up.

Catholics do not have a monopoly on wrongful academic dissent

If you're Orthodox, are you tempted to say, "Duh, you're talking about Catholic dissidents! It is the sworn duty of His Majesty's Loyal Opposition to oppose, and you can count on His Holiness's Disloyal Opposition to at least do *that* much. But Orthodoxy has none of those problems"?

Don't.

Almost every issue described above with Catholic dissidents is also something I've seen in Orthodoxy, perhaps on a smaller scale. The biggest thing I remember about one Orthodox scholar's lecturing is the consistent meta-message, never put in so many words, that the way we should relate to the ancient works of holy Fathers is ultimately with haughtiness and scorn, as *we* could unmask what the texts *really* were like. Nor is it just this one professor. If, in our age, humanities scholars rehabilitate figures like the Marquis de Sade, and some academic theologians rehabilitate Arius and Nestorius, then sure enough, Orthodox scholars, who are not *exactly* free to rehabilitate heretics, at least rehabilitate the much-maligned Augustine. The list goes on.

There may be a place for scholarship. But whatever that

place may be, it is not a reason to stop handling difficulties pastorally. I know that I have, in my research, turned up stuff that appeared to be a reason to impose a significant change. This has happened more than once, and sometimes I was wrong. I once heard an Orthodox bishop give advice to a newly-ordained priest that he should not set about agendas for change in his parish-to-be, even for a pure and honorable purpose that is unquestionably right. That is to say that a priest can be right about something with respect to a parish under his care, and it is not his place to whip it into shape. And if it is not the place of clergy in authority to whip a parish into shape, still less is it the duty of researchers to apply political force to straighten out a benighted hierarchy who don't see things their way.

But what if you are right?

But what if you're right? And your words are not heeded? Then there may be sin in the picture, but *the sin does not belong to you*. St. Paul, at the end of his life, had greater achievements than one would expect of a Nobel Prize laureate. He could have written to St. Timothy, "*Veni, vidi, vici!*": "I came, I saw, I conquered!" But what he wrote instead was, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my race, I have kept the faith" ([II Tim 4:7](#)): he did not say, "I achieved," but only, "I was faithful," and in our life of faith it is not our responsibility to achieve, but only to be faithful.

But what if things are really, really bad?

There is a profound difference between Dante and Luther, to give a Western example, and it is not really which centuries they lived in: both lived in troubled times where there were major problems in the Roman Church. Dante and Luther alike were absolutely incensed at abuses they

knew full well, and one surprise to naive Protestants first reading the *Commedia* is that Dante placed the Pope in Hell and seemed to treat the Pope's very name as an abomination. The difference between Dante and Luther is this: Dante remained to his dying day a loyal son of the Roman Church, but Luther took matters into his own hands—and created problems that are with us to this day.

True discipleship

What we should aspire to is discipleship: sitting at the feet of the Lord, the Church, the Apostles, the Fathers, the clergy, and the faithful. The academic approach that is called "critical" may be enough to grasp logic, but it utterly fails to grasp the Logos: what makes a theologian and a teacher is not being critical *par excellence* but being a disciple *par excellence*. The paradigm example is not "...the inspiring, romantic image of the heroic, noble historian who delves past popular piety and the decisions of clergy up to and including the Pope, heroically rips apart a cherished fixture that neither the faithful nor Church officials are noble or brave enough to question, and his trust is shamefully betrayed by the Vatican." It is rather everything that such a scholar would seek to push past.

Perhaps I am pushing my own romantic image and ripping up cherished fixtures of my own. But to an interlocutor concerned about irony, I would not deny that I am pushing a romantic image, but rather I would suggest that I am pushing an image that is worth pushing: that of discipleship, that of sitting at the Lord's feet, that of divine sonship, that of being a servant at the Lord's disposal, that of living the divine Life. It is not the knowledge of the Enlightenment's version of Reason, but a knowledge that runs deep as the Song of Songs: the knowing that drinks and the drinking that knows.

A practical example

Let me give one illustration from my own life. Even from very early on, I remember the local priest telling me that, contrary to the prohibition of contraception I expected, the Orthodox Church holds that it can be allowed or disallowed by a couple's priest after consultation, that it was not permissible to decide not to have children altogether, and the Orthodox Church has never spoken beyond that. I submitted then to Orthodoxy and accepted what he said. Then, later on, I found a really nasty surprise: despite ancient Orthodox condemnations of contraception, a spin-doctoring doozy of an article had apparently been taken simply as a straightforward account Orthodox teaching. And I wrote [Orthodoxy, Contraception, and Spin Doctoring: A Look at an Influential and Disturbing Article](#), and apart from showing it to an Orthodox priest or two and some trusted faithful, kept it off the record for a long time. And then, after a long time, I published it on [Jonathan's Corner](#), and later, after publishing it, found that I fit in as part of a quite broad consensus on an excellent online Orthodox forum.

What would I do differently if I had to do it over again? The answer is that I probably published my article too quickly: however important the issue may be, I might have done well to wait until later on. But I do not regret, as I was moving towards Orthodoxy, accepting the priest's word for what Orthodoxy taught, even though something about it seemed wrong at the time. Nor do I regret sitting on my writeup and do nothing with it for a long time, besides bring it up with a few people off the record. I believe it is an important issue (and anything but a matter of correctness for the sake of correctness: [contraception bears some nasty hidden price tags](#)), and that discipleship is more important, so that it is a fundamental error to let My Important Issue trump living and acting as a disciple. Even if I were right and the Church

leadership had responded sinfully and wrongly, the sin would belong to them, not me: my concern and duty is discipleship. It would be sin for me to decide it was my place to whip the Orthodox Church into shape, even if I happened to be right about what I thought of as the only issue!

(And there have been other, more embarrassing instances when I thought I could improve things and guess what? I was wrong.)

Scholarship may be useful—but it *cannot* replace discipleship

Scholarship and discipleship can be found together: some excellent theology has been written by scholars and in an academic context. However, genuine theology is theology because it comes from discipleship rather than scholarly rigor. Even the more academic examples of good theology are good by virtue of discipleship: to ask the scholarly training shared by Christian and anti-Christian scholars alike to power the movement of good theology is like asking a computer with a word processor to be the decisive force in writing a good novel. A word processor is a useful tool and perhaps not wisely ignored: but do not bark up the wrong tree by asking it to make someone a novelist, and do not bark up the wrong tree to ask scholarship to make someone a theologian.

For a theologian to push an agenda to improve the Church makes sense if you think theology falls under the heading of scholarship. But once you understand theology as a flower of discipleship, the picture starts to look quite different.

Theology in its deepest sense cannot be held by books at all: it is contemplation and the flower and the fruit of discipleship. But even for those of us who may never climb so high, the sort of theology one can write down is a flower

and a fruit of discipleship. And it seems that academic research is rarely allowed to veto whatever orients a person's life: conservative and liberal alike go to the sources and return with their beliefs confirmed. It takes something fundamentally vaster—living discipleship in the Church—to unlock the heart of theology.

Let us be disciples!

Exotic Golden Ages and Restoring Harmony with Nature: Anatomy of a Passion

It's exotic, right?

The website for the Ubuntu Linux distribution announced that Ubuntu is "an ancient African word" meaning humanity to others. It announced how it carried forward the torch of a Linux distribution that's designed for regular people to use. And this promotion of "an ancient African word" has bothered a few people: [one South African blogger](#) tried to explain several things: for instance, he mentioned that "ubuntu" had been a quite ordinary Xhosa/Zulu word meaning "humanity," mentioned that it had been made into a political rallying cry in the 20th century, and drew an analogy: saying, "'Ubuntu' is an ancient African word meaning 'humanity'" is as silly as saying, in reverential tones, "'People' is an ancient European word meaning, 'more than one person.'" There is an alternative definition provided in the forums of Gentoo, a technical aficionado's

Linux distribution: "Ubuntu. An African word meaning, 'Gentoo is too hard for me.'"

The blogger raised questions of gaffe in the name of the distribution; he did not raise questions about the Linux distribution itself, nor would I. Ubuntu is an excellent Linux distribution for nontechnical users, it gets some things very much right, and I prefer it to most other forms of Linux I've seen—including Gentoo. I wouldn't bash the distribution, nor would I think of bashing what people mean by making "ubuntu" a rallying-cry in pursuing, in their words, "Linux for human beings."

The offense lay in something else, and it is something that, in American culture at least, runs deep: it was a crass invocation of an Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom. It is considered an impressive beginning to a speech to open by recounting an Archetypal Exotic Culture's Awesome Nugget of Profound Wisdom: whether one is advertising a Linux distribution, a neighbor giving advice over a fence in *Home Improvement*, or a politician delivering a speech, it is taken as a mark of sophistication and depth to build upon the Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom.

At times I've had a sneaking suspicion that the Archetypal Exotic Culture's Awesome Nugget of Profound Wisdom is the mouthpiece for whatever is fashionable in the West at the time. Let me give one illustration, if one that veers a bit close to the Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom:

One American friend of mine, when in Kenya, gave a saying that was not from any of the people groups she was interacting with, but was from a relatively close neighboring people group: "When you are carrying a child in your womb, he only belongs to you. When he is born, he belongs to everyone." The proverb speaks out of an assumption that not only parents but parents' friends, neighbors, elders,

shopkeepers, and ultimately all adults, stand *in parentis loco*. All adults are ultimately responsible for all children and are responsible for exercising a personal and parental care to help children grow into mature adulthood. As best I understand, this is probably what a particular community in Africa might mean in saying, "It takes a village to raise a child."

What is a little strange is that, if these words correspond to anything in the U.S., they are conservative, and speak to a conservative desire to believe that not only parents but neighbors, churches, civic and local organizations, businesses and the like, all owe something to the moral upbringing of children: that is to say, there are a great many forces outside the government that owe something to local children. And this is quite the opposite of saying that we need more government programs because it takes a full complement of government initiatives and programs to raise a child well—because, presumably, more and more bureaucratic initiatives are what the (presumably generic) African sages had in mind when they gave the Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom and said, "It takes a village to raise a child." There is some degree of irony in making "It takes a village" a rallying-cry in pushing society *further away* from what, "It takes a village to raise a child," *could* have originally meant—looking for advice on how to build a statist Western-style cohort of bureaucratic government programs would be as inconceivable in many traditional African cultures as looking for instructions on how to build a computer in the New Testament.

My point in mentioning this is not *primarily* sensitivity to people who don't like hearing people spout about a supposedly "ancient African word" such as, "Ubuntu." Nor is my point really about how, whenever a saying is introduced as an ancient aboriginal proverb, the Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom ends up shanghied into being an eloquent statement of whatever

fads are blowing around in the West today. My deepest concern is that the Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom hinges on something that is bad for us spiritually.

The Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom is tied to what the Orthodox Church refers to as a "passion," which means something very different from either being passionately in love, or being passionate about a cause or a hobby, or even religious understandings of the passion of Christ. The concept of a passion is a religious concept of a spiritual disease that one feeds by thoughts and actions that are out of step with reality. There is something like the concept of a passion in the idea of an addiction, a bad habit, or in other Christians whose idea of sin is mostly about spiritual state rather than mere actions. A passion is a spiritual disease that we feed by our sins, and the concern I raise about the Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom is one way—out of many ways we have—that we feed one specific passion.

The Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom is occult, and we cannot give the same authority to any source that is here and now. If we listen to the wise voices of elders, it is only elders from faroff lands who can give such deeply relevant words: I have never heard such a revered Nugget of Wisdom come from the older generation of our own people, or any of the elders we meet day to day.

By "occult" I mean something more than an Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom that might note that the word "occult" etymologically signifies "hidden"—and still does, in technical medical usage—and that the Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom has been dug up from someplace obscure and hidden. Nor is it really my point that the Nugget may be dug up from an occult source—as when I heard an old man, speaking with a majesterial voice, give a homily for the

(Christmas) Festival of Lessons and Carols that begun by building on a point from a famous medieval Kabbalist. These are at best tangentially related. What I mean by calling the Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom occult is that the Archetypal Exotic Culture's Nugget of Profound Wisdom is the fruit of the same tree as explicitly occult practices—and they are tributaries feeding the same river.

Occult sin is born out of a sense that the way things are in the here and now that God has placed us in are not enough: Gnosticism has been said to hinge, not so much on a doctrine, but something like a mood, a mood of despair. (You might say a passion of despair.) Gnostic Scripture is a sort of spiritual porn that offers a dazzling escape from the present—a temptation whose power is much stronger on people yearning for such escape than for people who have learned the virtuous inoculation of contentment.

It takes virtue to enjoy even vice, and that includes contentment. As a recovering alcoholic will tell you, being drunk all the time is misery, and, ultimately, you have to be at least somewhat sober even to enjoy getting drunk. It takes humility to enjoy even pride, and chastity to enjoy even lust. Contentment does not help us escape—it helps us find joy where we were not looking for it, precisely in what we were trying to escape. We do not find a way out of the world—what we find is really and truly a way into where God has placed us.

One can almost imagine a dialogue between God and Adam:

Adam: I'm not content.

God: What do you want me to do?

Adam: I want you to make me contented.

God: Ok, how do you want me to do that?

Adam: First of all, I don't want to have to engage in

ardent, strenuous labor like most people. I don't want to do that kind of work at all.

God: Ok.

Adam: And that's not all. I want to have enough bread to feel full.

God: Ok.

Adam: Scratch that. I want as much *meat* as I want.

God: Ok, as much meat as you want.

Adam: And sweet stuff like ice cream.

God: Ok, I'll give you Splenda ice cream so it won't show up on your waistline.

Adam: And I don't like to be subject to the weather and the elements you made. I want a home which will be cool in the summer and warm in the winter.

God: Sure. And I'll give you hot and cold running water, too!

Adam: Speaking of that, I don't like how my body smells—could we do something to hide that?

God: I'll let you bathe. Each day. In as much water as you want. And I'll give you deodorant to boot!

Adam: Oh, and by the way, I want to make my own surroundings—not just a home. I want electronics to put me in another world.

[*Now we're getting nowhere in a hurry!*]

This may be a questionable portrayal of God, but it is an accurate portrayal of the Adam who decided that being an immortal in paradise wasn't good enough for him.

Have all these things made us content?

Or have we used them to feed a passion?

We have a lot of ways of wishing that God had placed us someplace else, someplace different. One of the most interesting books I've glanced through, but not read, was covered in pink rosy foliage, and said that it was dealing with the #1 cause of unhappiness in women's relationships. And that #1 cause was a surprise: romantic fantasies. The point was that dreaming up a romantic fantasy and then trying to make it real is a recipe, not for fulfillment, but for heartbreaking disappointment *in circumstances where you could be truly happy*. (When you have your heart set on a fantasy of just how the perfect man will fulfill all your desires and transform your world, no *real* man can seem anything but a disappointing shadow next to your fantasy.)

This is not just a point about fantasies in romance. It is also a point that has something to do with technological wonders, secret societies, fascination with the paranormal, Star Trek, World of Warcraft, television, Dungeons and Dragons, sacramental shopping, SecondLife, conspiracy theories, smartphones, daydreams, Halloween, Harry Potter, Wicked, Wicca, The Golden Compass, special effects movies, alienated feminism, radical conservatism, Utopian dreams, political plans to transform the world, and every other way that we tell God, "Sorry, what you have given me is not good enough"—or what is much the same, wish God had given us something quite different.

Why, in my life, is _____ so difficult to me about _____? (I don't know; why has she forgiven every single one of the astonishingly stupid things I've done over the years?) Why can't I lose a couple of pounds when I want to? (I don't know; why do I have enough food that I wish I could lose pounds?) Why am I struggling with my debts? (I don't know; why do I have enough for now?) Why did I have to fight cancer? (I don't know; why am I alive and strong now?) Why does I stand to lose so much of what I've taken for granted? (I don't know. Why did I take them all for granted? And why did I have so many privileges growing

up?) Why _____? (Why not? Why am I ungrateful and discontent with so many blessings?)

Contentment is a choice, and it has been made by people in much bleaker circumstances than mine.

I write this, not as one who has mightily fought this temptation to sin and remained pure, but as one who has embraced the sin wholeheartedly. I know the passion from the inside, and I know it well. Most of my cherished works on this site were written to be "interesting", and more specifically "interesting" as some sort of escape from a dreary here and now.

There is enough of this sin that, when I began to repent, I wondered if repenting would leave anything left in my writing. And after I had let go of that, I found that there was still something left to write. C.S. Lewis, in [The Great Divorce](#), alluded to the Sermon on the Mount (where Christ said that if our right hand or our right eye causes us to sin, we should rip it out and enter Heaven maimed rather than let our whole body be thrown into the lake of burning sulfur): Lewis said that the journey to Heaven may cost us our right hand and our right eye—but when we arrive in Heaven, we will find that what we have left behind is precisely *nothing*. Continuing to repent has meant changes for me, and it will (I hope) mean further changes. But I let go of writing only to find that I still had things to write. I gave up on trying to be "interesting" and make my own interesting private world and found, by the way, that God and his world are really *quite* interesting.

When we are repenting, or trying to, or trying not to, repentance is the ultimate terror. It seems unconditional surrender—and it is. But when we do repent, we realize, "I was holding on to a piece of Hell," and we realize that repentance is also a waking up, a coming to our senses, and a coming to joy.

What we don't want to hear

I would like to say a word on the politically incorrect term of "unnatural vice." Today there is an effort on some Christians to not distinguish that sharply between homosexuality and straight sexual sins. And it is always good practice to focus on one's own sins and their gravity, but there are very specific reasons to be concerned about unnatural vice. Let me draw an analogy.

It is a blinding flash of the obvious that a well-intentioned miscommunication can cause a conflict that is painful to all involved. And if miscommunications are not necessarily a sin, they can be painful enough, and not the sort of thing one wants to celebrate. However, there is a depth of difference between an innocent, if excruciatingly painful, miscommunication on the one hand, and the kind of conflict when someone deliberately gives betrayal under the guise of friendship. The Church Fathers had a place for a holy kiss as a salute among Christians, but in their mind the opposite of a holy kiss was not a kiss that was what we would understand "inappropriate," but when Judas said, "Master," saluted the Lord with a kiss, and by so doing betrayed him to be tortured to death. A painful miscommunication is bad enough, but a betrayal delivered under the guise of friendship is a problem with a higher pay grade.

Lust benefits no one, and it is not just the married who benefit from beating back roving desire, but the unmarried as well. But when Scripture and the Fathers speak of unnatural vice, they know something we've chosen to forget. And part of what we have forgotten is that "unnatural vice" is not just something that the gay rights movement advocates for. "Unnatural vice" includes several sins with higher pay grades, and one of them is witchcraft.

To people who have heard all the debates about whether, for

instance, same-sex relationships might be unnatural for straight people but natural for gays, it may be a bit of culture shock to hear anything *besides* gay sex called "unnatural vice." But the term is there in the Fathers, and it can mean other things. [It might include contraception.](#) And it definitely includes what we think of as a way to return to nature in witchcraft.

Adam reigned as an immortal king and lord over the whole world. He had a wife like nothing else in all Creation, paradise for a home, and harmony with nature such as we could not dream of. *And*, he was like a little boy with a whole room full of toys who is miserable because he wants another toy and his parents said "No." And lest we look down on Adam, we should remember that I am Adam, and you are Adam.

We have not lost all his glory, but we are crippled by his passion.

Adam wanted something beyond what he was given, something beyond his ken. An Orthodox hymn says, "Wanting to be a god, Adam failed to be god." More on that later. Adam experienced the desire that draws people to magic—even if the magic's apparent promise is a restored harmony with nature. This vice shattered the original harmony with nature, and brought a curse on not only Adam but nature itself. It corrupted nature. It introduced death. It means that many animals are terrified of us. It means that even the saints, the holiest of people, are the most aware of how much evil is in them—most of us are disfigured enough that we can think we don't have any *real* problem. There is tremendous good in the human person, too; that should be remembered. But even the saints are great sinners. All of this came through Adam's sin. How much more unnatural of a vice do you ask for than that?

Trying to restore past glory, and how it further estranges us from the past

When I was visiting a museum promising an exhibit on the Age of Reason, I was jarred to see ancient Greek/Roman/... items laid out in exhibits; what was being shown about the Enlightenment was the beginning of museums as we have them today. I was expecting to see coverage of a progressive age, and what I saw was a pioneering effort to reclaim past glory. Out of that jarring I realized something that historians might consider a blinding flash of the obvious. Let me explain the insight nonetheless, before tying it in with harmony with nature.

When people have tried to recover past glory, through the Western means of antiquarian reconstruction, the result severs continuity with the recent past and ultimately made a deeper schism from the more remote past as well.

The Renaissance was an attempt to recover the glory of classical antiquity, but the effect was not only to more or less end what there was in the Middle Ages, but help the West move away from some things that were common to the Middle Ages and antiquity alike. The Reformation might have accomplished many good things, but it did not succeed in its goal in resurrecting the ancient Church; it created a new way of being Christian. The Protestants I know are moral giants compared to much of what was going on in Rome in Luther's day, and they know Scripture far better, but Protestant Christianity is a decisive break from something that began in the Early Church and remained unbroken even in corrupt 16th century Rome. And it is not an accident that the Reformers dropped the traditional clerical clothing and wore instead the scholar's robes. (Understanding the Scripture was much less approached through reading the saints, much more by antiquarian

scholarship.) The Enlightenment tried again to recover classical glory, and it was simultaneously a time, not of breaking with unbroken ways of being Christian, but of breaking with being Christian itself. Romanticism could add the Middle Ages to the list of past glorious ages, and it may well be that without the Romantics, we would not have great medievalists like C.S. Lewis and J.R.R. Tolkien. But it was also something new. Every single time that I'm aware of that the West has tried to recover the glory of a bygone age, the effect has been a deeper rift with the past, both recent and ultimately ancient, leaving people much further alienated from the past than if they had continued without the reconstruction. I remember being astonished, not just to learn that two Vatican II watchwords were *ressourcement* (going back to ancient sources to restore past glory) and *aggiornamento* (bringing things up-to-date, which in practice meant bringing Rome in line with 1960's fads), nor that the two seemed to be two sides of the same coin, but that this was celebrated without anybody seeming to find something of a disturbing clue in this. The celebrations of these two watchwords seemed like a celebration of going to a hospital to have a doctor heal an old wound and inflict a new wound that is more fashionable.

The lesson would seem to be, "If you see a new way to connect with the past and recover past glory, be very careful. Consider it like you might consider a skilled opponent, in a game of chess, leaving a major piece vulnerable. It looks spiritually enticing, but it might be the bait for a spiritual trap, and if so, the consequences of springing for the bait might be a deeper rift with the past and its glory."

Not quite as shallow an approach to translate the past into the present...

Here is what you might do one day to live a bit more like prehistoric Grecians, or ancient Celts, or medieval Gallic peasants, or whatever. Keep in mind that this is at best half-way to its goal, not a full-fledged return to living like an ancient in harmony with nature to a day, but making a rough equivalent by using what is closest from our world:

1. However exotic the setting may seem to you, remember that it is a fundamental confusion to imagine that the setting was exotic *to those inside the experience*. We not only meet new people frequently; we see new technologies invented frequently. In The Historic Setting, people most likely were born, lived, and died within twenty miles, and even meeting another person who was not part of your village was rare. A new invention, or a new idea, would be difficult to imagine, let alone point to. So, for one day, whatever you're doing, if it feels exotic, avoid it like the plague. Stop it immediately. Don't read anything new; turn off your iPod; don't touch Wikipedia. Don't seek excitement; if anything, persevere in things you find boring.
2. Remembering that there was a lot of heavy manual labor, and stuff that was shared, spend your nice Saturday helping a friend move her stuff into her new apartment. Remember that while stairs were rare in antiquity, it would be an anachronism to take the elevator. Be a good manual laborer and do without the anachronism.
3. Remembering how the Sermon on the Mount betrays an assumption that most people were poor enough

that houses would only have one room, spend your time at home, as much as possible, in one room of your house.

4. Remembering that the ancient world had no sense of "Jim's trying to lose weight and is on an old-fashioned low-fat diet, Mary's a vegan, Al's low carb...", but rather there was one diet that everybody day ate, go to McDonald's, order a meal with McDonald's McFries McSoaked in McGrease, and a sugary-sweet, corn-syrup-powered shake.

If you just said to yourself, "He didn't say what size; I'll order the smallest I can," order the biggest meal you can.

5. Remembering that in the ancient world the company you kept were not your eclectic pick, spend time with the people around you. Go to your neighbor Ralph who blears bad '80s rock because he thinks it's the best thing in the world, and like a good guest don't criticize what your host has provided—including his music. Spend some time playing board games with your annoying kid sister, and then go over to visit your uncle Wally and pretend to tolerate his sexist jokes.
6. Lastly, when you head home do have a good night's sleep, remember that a bed with sheets covering a smooth mattress was only slightly more common than a Frank Lloyd Wright home is today, go to sleep on a straw pallet in your virtual one room house. (You can use organic straw if you can find any.)

This may seem, to put it politely, a way you would never have thought to live like an age in harmony with nature. But let me ask a perfectly serious question:

What *did* you expect? Did you imagine dressing up as a bard, dancing on hilltops, and reciting poetry about the

endless knot while quaffing heather ale?

G.K. Chesterton said that there is more simplicity in eating caviar on impulse than eating granola on principle. In a similar fashion, there is more harmony with nature in instinctively pigging out at McDonald's than making a high and lonely spiritual practice out of knowing all the herbs in a meadow.

The vignette of harmony with nature as dancing on hilltops is an image of a scene where harmony with nature means fulfilling what we desire for ourselves. The image of hauling boxes to help a friend is a scene where harmony with nature means *transcending* mere selfish desire. There is a common thread of faithfulness to unadvertised historical realities running through the six steps listed above. But there is another common thread:

Humility.

It chafes against a passion that people in ages past knew they needed to beat back.

Living according to nature in the past did not work without humility, and living in harmony with nature today did not work with humility.

There is a great deal of difference between getting help in living for yourself, and getting help in living for something more for yourself, and living for something more than yourself—such as people needed to survive in ancient communities close to nature—is the real treasure. It is spirituality with an ugly pair of work gloves, and it is a much bigger part of those communities that have been in harmony with nature than the superficially obvious candidates like spending more time outside and knowing when to plant different crops. If you clarify, "Actually, I was really more interested in the *spirituality* of a bygone age and its harmony with nature," you are missing something. Every one of those humbling activities is pregnant with

spirituality—and is spiritual in a much deeper way than merely feeling the beauty of a ritual.

Perhaps we would be wise to remember the words of the Delphic Oracle, "Know thyself," which does not say what we might imagine today. Those words might have been paraphrased, "Know thy place, O overreaching mortal!"

And, in terms of humility, that has much more to give us than trying to reach down inside and make a sandcastle of an identity, and hope it won't be another sandcastle.

Should I really be patting myself on the back?

I try to follow a diet that is closer to many traditional diets, has less processing and organic ingredients when possible, and I believe for several reasons that I am right in doing so: medical, animal welfare, and environmental. But before I pat myself on the back too hard for showing the spirit of Orthodoxy in harmony with nature, I would be well advised to remember that there is far more precedent in the Fathers and in the saint's lives for choosing to live on a cup of raw lentils a week or a diet of rancid fish.

Saints may have followed something of a special diet, but that is because they believed and acted out of the conviction that they were unworthy of the good things of the world, including the common fare what most people ate. My diet, like other diets in fashion, is a diet that tells me that the common fare eaten by most people is simply unworthy of *me*. This may well enough be true—I have doubts about how much of today's industrially produced diet is fit for human consumption at all—and I may well enough answer, "But *of course* the Quarter Pounder with 'Cheese' eaten by an inner-city teen is unworthy of me—it's just as unworthy, if not more unworthy, of the inner-city teens who simply accept it as normal to eat." Even so, I have put myself in a

difficult position. The saints thought they were unworthy of common fare. I believe that common fare is unworthy of me, and trying to believe that without deadly pride is trying to smoke, but not inhale.

In [the Book of James](#), the Lord's brother says that the poor should exult because of their high position while the rich should be humble because of their low position. The same wisdom might see that the person who eats anything that tastes good is the one in the high position, and the person who avoids most normal food out of a special diet's discrimination is in a position that is both low and precarious.

The glory of the Eucharist unfurls in a common meal around a table, and this "common" meal is common because it is shared. To pull back from "common" food is to lose something very Eucharistic about the meal, and following one more discriminating diet like mine is a way to heal one breach of harmony with nature by opening up what may be a deeper rift.

If evil is necessary, does it stop being evil?

Orthodoxy in the West inherits something like counterculture, and there is something amiss when Orthodox carry over unquestioned endeavors to build a counterculture or worldview or other such Western fads. If Orthodoxy *in the West* is countercultural, that doesn't mean that counterculture is something to seek out: if Orthodoxy is countercultural, that is a cost it pays. Civil disobedience *can* be the highest expression of a citizen's respect for law. Amputation *can* be the greatest expression of a physician's concern for a patient's life. However, these things are not basically good, and there is fundamental confusion in seeking out occasions to show such measures.

Another basis to try and learn from the past

To someone in the West, Orthodoxy may have a mighty antiquarian appeal. Orthodox saints, for the most part, speak from long ago and far away. However, this isn't the point; it's a side effect of a Church whose family of saints has been growing for millennia. Compare this, for instance, to a listing of great computer scientists—who will all be recent, not because computer science in an opposite fashion needs to be new, but because computer science hasn't been around nearly long enough for there to be a fourth century von Neumann or Knuth.

Some people wanting very hard knife blades—this may horrify an antiquarian—acquire nineteenth century metal files and grind them into knife blades. The reason for this is that metallurgists today simply do not know how to make steel as hard as the hardest Victorian-era metal files. The know-how is lost. And the hobbyists who seek a hard metal file as the starting point for their knife blades do not choose old metalwork because it is old; they choose old metal files because they are the hardest they can get. And there is something like this in the Orthodox Church. The point of a saint's life is not how exotic a time and place the saint is from; the point of a saint's life is holiness, a holiness that is something like a nineteenth century adamantite-hard metal file.

If there are problems in turning back the clock, the Orthodox Church has some very good news. This good news is not exactly a special way to turn back the clock; it is rather the good news that the clock can be lifted up.

There is a crucial difference between trying to restore the past, and hoping that it will lift you into Heaven, and being lifted up into Heaven and finding that a healthy connection with the past comes with it. The Divine Liturgy is a lifting

up of the people and their lives up to Heaven: a life that begins here and now.

The hymn quoted earlier, "Adam, trying to be a god, failed to be god," continues, "Christ became man that he might make Adam god." The saying has rumbled down through the ages, "God (the Son of God) became a Man (the Son of Man) that men (the sons of men) might become gods (the Sons of God)." The bad news, if it is bad news, is that we cannot escape a present into the beauty of Eden. The good news is that the present can itself be lifted up, that the doors to Eden remain open.

In some ways our search for happiness is like that of a grandfather who cannot find his glasses no matter how many places he looks—because they are right on his nose.

Men are not from Mars!

I was once able to visit a Mars Society conference—a conference from an organization whose purpose is to send human colonists to Mars.

To many of the people there, the question of whether we are "a spacefaring race" is much weightier than the question of whether medical research can find a cure for cancer. It's not just that a human colony on Mars would represent a first-class triumph of science and humanity; it is rather that the human race is beyond being a race of complete, unspeakable, and obscene *losers* if we don't come to our senses and colonize Mars so the human race is not just living on this earth and living the kind of life we live now. The question of whether we colonize Mars is, in an ersatz sense, the religious question of whether we as a race have salvation. The John 3:16 of this movement is, "Earth is the cradle of mankind, but one does not remain in a cradle forever."

The Mars Society holds an essay contest to come up with

essays about why we should colonize Mars; the title of the contest, and perhaps of the essays, is, "Why Mars?" And, though I never got around to writing it, there was something I wanted to write.

This piece, having a fictional setting, would be written from the perspective of a sixteen year old girl who was the first person to be raised on Mars, and would provide another comparison of life on Mars to life on earth. And the essay would be snarky, sarcastic, angry, and bitter, because of something that people looking with starry eyes at a desired Mars colony miss completely.

What does the Mars Society not get about what they hope for?

When I was a student at Wheaton College, one of my friends told of a first heavy snowfall where students from warmer climates, some of whom had never experienced such a snowfall personally, were outside and had a delightful snowball fight. And they asked my friend, "How can you *not* be out here playing?" My friend's answer: "Just wait four months. You'll see."

One's first snowball fight is quite the pleasant experience, and presumably one's first time putting on a spacesuit is much better. But what my unattractively cynical friend didn't like about Wheaton's winter weather is a piece of cake compared to needing to put on a spacesuit and go through an airlock on a planet where the sum total of places one can go without a bulky, heavy, clumsy, uncomfortable, and hermetically sealed spacesuit, is dwarfed by a small rural village of a thousand people, and dwarfed by a medium sized jail. If you are the first person to grow up on Mars, the earth will seem a living Eden which almost everyone alive *but* you is privileged to live in. And the title of the snarky, sarcastic, and bitterly miserable essay I wished I could write from the perspective of the first human raised on Mars was, "*Why Earth?*"

I'm used to seeing people wish they could escape the here and now, but the Mars Society took this to a whole new level—so much so that I was thinking, "This is not a job for science and engineering; this is a job for counseling!" People were alienated from the here and now they had on earth, and the oomph of the drive to go to Mars seemed to be because of something else entirely from the (admittedly very interesting) scientific and engineering issues. Having the human race not even try to live on Mars was so completely unacceptable to them because of their woundedness.

If you don't know how to be happy where God has placed you, escape will not solve the problem. In the case of Mars, the interesting issue is not so much whether colonization is possible, but whether it is desirable. Escape may take you out of the frying pan and into the thermite. (What? You didn't know that astronauts do not feel free, but like tightly wedged "spam in a can," with land control micromanaging you more than you would fear in a totalitarian regime, down to every bite of food you take in? Tough; a real opportunity to colonize Mars won't feel like being in an episode of *Star Trek* or *Firefly*.)

This is the playing out of a passion, and what the Mars Society seeks will not make them permanently happy. Success in their goals will not cure such misery any more than enough fuel will soothe a fire.

Confucius said, "When I see a virtuous man, I try to be like him. When I see an evil man, I reflect on my own behavior." Assuming you're not from the Mars Society (and perhaps offended), do you see anything of yourself in the Mars Society?

I do.

A more satisfying kind of drink

I talked with a friend about a cookbook, [Nourishing Traditions](#), which I like for the most part but where there was a bit of a burr: the author ground an axe against alcoholic beverages fermented by yeast. The stated position of the book is a report of a certain type of traditional nutrition, and the author overrode that when it came to traditions that used rum and such.

My friend said that what I said was accurate: certain more alcoholic drinks were traditional, and the principles of [Nourishing Traditions](#) did not support all the ways the author was grinding an axe against yeast-fermented alcohol, just as I thought. However, my friend suggested, the author was right about this. Lacto-fermented beverages, fermented by another ancient process that gives us cheese, sourdough, sauerkraut, corned beef, and the like, which [Nourishing Traditions](#) did promote, satisfy in a way that yeast-fermented beverages do not. People, it seems, use beer, wine, and liquor because they remind them of the satisfaction of the more ancient method of fermentation.

I'm not looking at giving up the occasional drink, but something of that rings true—and parallels a spiritual matter. People turn to a quest for the exotic, and that is illicit. But the Orthodox experience is that if you stay put, in the here and now, and grow spiritually, every year or so something exotic happens that is like falling off a cliff, when you repent. And that may be what people are connecting with in the wrong way in the pursuit of the exotic. If you give up on following the exotic, something beyond exotic may follow you.

The idiot

There was another piece that I was thinking of writing, but did not come together. The title I was thinking of was, *The*

Idiot—no connection to Dostoevsky's work of the same name, nor to what we would usually think of as a lack of intelligence.

I was imagining a Socratic dialogue, along the same lines as [Plato: The Allegory of the... Flickering Screen?](#) in which it unfolds that the person who doesn't get it is someone who has great success in constructing his own private world through technology, introspection, and everything else. Etymologically, the word "idiot" signifies someone who's off on his own—someone who does not participate in the life of civilization—and our civilization offers excellent resources to dodge civilization and create your own private world. And that is a loss.

And being an idiot in this sense is *not* a matter of low IQ. It is not the mentally retarded I have known who need to repent most, if at all. Usually it is the most brilliant I have known who best use their gifts and resources to be, in the classical sense, idiots.

Some adamantine-hard metal files that may hone us

At the risk of irony after opening by a complaint about words of wisdom from other lands selected for being exotic...

My mother recounted how a friend of hers was visiting one of her friends, a poor woman in Guatemala. She looked around her host's kitchen, and said, "You don't have any food around." Her hostess said, "No, I don't, but I will," and then paused a moment longer, and said, "And if I had the food now, what would I need God for?" That woman is wise. Those of us who live in the West pray, "Give us this day our daily bread," and probably have a 401(k) plan. Which is to say that "Give us today our daily bread" is almost an ornament to us. A very pious ornament, but it is still an

ornament.

If we are entering hard times today, is that an end to divine providence?

St. Peter of Damaskos wrote, in [The Philokalia vol. 3](#),

We ought all of us always to thank God for both the universal and the particular gifts of soul and body that He bestows on us. The universal gifts consist of the four elements and all that comes into being through them, as well as all the marvelous works of God mentioned in the divine Scriptures. The particular gifts consist of all that God has given to each individual. These include:

- Wealth, so that one can perform acts of charity.
- Poverty, so that one can endure it with patience and gratitude.
- Authority, so that one can exercise righteous judgment and establish virtue.
- Obedience and service, so that one can more readily attain salvation of soul.
- Health, so that one can assist those in need and undertake work worthy of God.
- Sickness, so that one may earn the crown of patience.
- Spiritual knowledge and strength, so that one may acquire virtue.
- Weakness and ignorance, so that, turning

one's back on worldly things, one may be under obedience in stillness and humility.

- Unsought loss of goods and possessions, so that one may deliberately seek to be saved and may even be helped when incapable of shedding all one's possessions or even of giving alms.
- Ease and prosperity, so that one may voluntarily struggle and suffer to attain the virtues and thus become dispassionate and fit to save other souls.
- Trials and hardship, so that those who cannot eradicate their own will may be saved in spite of themselves, and those capable of joyful endurance may attain perfection.

All these things, even if they are opposed to each other, are nevertheless good when used correctly; but when misused, they are not good, but are harmful for both soul and body.

The story is probably apocryphal, but I heard of an African pastor (sorry, I don't know his nationality) who visited the U.S. and said, "It's absolutely amazing what you can do without the Holy Spirit!" That is, perhaps, not what we want to hear as a compliment. But here in the U.S., if we need God, it's been easy to lose sight of the fact. Homeless people usually know where their next meal is coming from, or at least it's been that way, and homeless people have been getting much more appetizing meals than bread alone. Those of us who are not homeless have even more power than that.

An English friend of mine talked about how she was living in a very poor country, and one of her hosts said, "I envy you!" My friend didn't know exactly what was coming next—she thought it might be something that offered no defense, and her hosts said, "You have everything, and you still rely on God. We have *nothing*; we have no real alternative. So we rely on God. But you have *everything*, and you still rely on God!" The point was not about wealth, but faith. The friend's awe was not of a rich woman's treasures on earth, but a rich woman's treasures in Heaven. The camel really *can* go through the eye of the needle, and we may add to the list of examples by St. Peter of Damaskos, that we may thank God for first world wealth, because it gives us an opportunity to *choose* to rely on God.

Maybe we can add to St. Peter's list. But we would do well to listen to his wisdom before adding to his list. We have been given many blessings in first world economic conditions, and if our economy is in decline—perhaps it will bounce back in a year, perhaps longer, perhaps never—we no less should find where our current condition is on the list above.

To have the words "Give us this day our daily bread" unfortunately be an ornament is rare, and perhaps it is not the most natural condition for us to be in. Whatever golden age you may like, centuries or millenia ago, there was no widespread wealth like we experience. Our natural condition is, in part, to be under economic constraint, to have limits that keep us from doing things, and in some sense the level of wealth we have had is not the most natural condition, like having a sedentary enough job that you only exercise when you choose to, is not the most natural condition. Now I don't like being constrained any more than I have to, and I would not celebrate people losing their homes. However, if we have to be more mindful of what they spend, and don't always get what we want, that may be a very big blessing in disguise.

Dorothy Sayers, speaking of World War II in "The Other Six Deadly Sins" (found in [Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World](#) and other essay collections), discussed what life was like when the economy was enormously productive but as much productivity as possible was being wasted by the war effort. What she pointed out was that when people got used to rationing and scarcity, they found that this didn't really mean that they couldn't enjoy life—far from it. People could enjoy life when most of their economy's productivity was being wasted by war instead of wasted by buying things that people didn't need. She argued that England didn't have a choice about learning to live frugally—but England could choose to apply this lesson once the war got out. England didn't, and neither did the U.S., but the lesson is still good.

A recent news story discussed how adult children moved in with their parents as a measure of frugality, where the family was being frugal to the point of planning meals a month in advance and grinding their own flour. And what they found was that living simply was something of an adventure.

An unlikely cue from science fiction?

Mary Midgley, in [Science as Salvation: A Modern Myth and Its Meaning](#), says of science fiction and science fiction writers,

But the best of them have understood, as Wells and Stapleton did, that their main aim was imaginative. They were using 'the future' as a screen on which to project timeless truths for their own age. They were *prophets* primarily in the sense in which serious poets are so — spiritual guides, people with insight about the present and the universal, rather than literal

predictors. For this purpose, it no more matters whether these supposedly future events will actually happen than it does for *Hamlet* and *MacBeth* whether what they show us actually happened in the past. The point of *The Time Machine* is not that the machine would work, nor that there might be Morlocks [a powerful, privileged technological elite] somewhere, some day. It is that there are Morlocks here now.

Note the last words. C.S. Lewis may quite directly and literally believe in a literal Heaven and a literal Hell, but Lewis understands Midgley's closing point well, even if he wrote [The Great Divorce](#) decades before. He offers an introduction that ends with, "The last thing I wish is to arouse curiosity about the details of the after-world." He may have no pretensions of knowing the details of the next life, but the reason he writes so compellingly about Heaven and Hell is not that someday, somewhere, we will experience Heaven or Hell. (Even if that is true.) He is able to write with such depth because Heaven and Hell are in us, here and now. And one of the cardinal spiritual factors in [The Great Divorce](#) is a cardinal spiritual factor here now. It is called repentance.

In [The Sign of the Grail](#), Fr. Elijah brings George, a Christian, into the communion of the Orthodox Church. Orthodox speak of this as a conversion, but this means something beyond merely straightening out George's worldview. Fr. Elijah may share wisdom with George, but he is interested in something fundamentally beyond getting George to accept a worldview. He is trying, in all of his various ways, to get George to *wake up*. It is the same as the blessed spirits in [The Great Divorce](#) who are in Heaven and keep saying to visitors from Hell, "*Wake up! Wake up!*" They do often discuss ideas with their visitors, but their goal is never merely to straighten out a tormented worldview; it

is to open their visitors' spiritual eyes so they will wake up to the reality of Heaven.

In [The Great Divorce](#), visitors come from Hell, visit Heaven, keep receiving invitations to wake up and live in Heaven, and mostly keep on choosing Hell. If it is put that way, it sounds like a very strange story, but it is believable not primarily because of C.S. Lewis's rhetorical powers, but because of the spiritual realities Lewis knows to write about. I have only heard one person claim to want to go to Hell, and then on the misunderstanding that you could enjoy the company of others in Hell. However, people miss something big about Hell if they think everybody will choose Heaven.

God does not send people to Hell, but the fires of Hell are nothing other than the light of Heaven experienced through the rejection of Christ. Hell appeared as a seed in the misery when, as I wrote earlier:

Adam reigned as an immortal king and lord over the whole world. He had a wife like nothing else in all Creation, paradise for a home, and harmony with nature such as we could not dream of. *And*, he was like a little boy with a whole room full of toys who is miserable because he wants another toy and his parents said "No."

[The Sermon on the Mount](#) says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." But *everyone* will see God. God is love; his love is absolute and will flow absolutely. Because of that love, everybody will see God. And the saved will know this as blessing and as bliss beyond description. But to those who reject Christ, the light of Heaven, the light of seeing God, will be experienced as *Hellfire*. Hell is Heaven experienced through the rejection of the only ultimate joy that exists: Christ.

Repentance is recognizing that you are in a little Hell and choosing to leave by the one way you do not wish to leave.

Elsewhere from the quotation from St. Peter, [the Philokalia](#) says, "People hold on to sin because they think it adorns them." The woman addicted to alcohol may be in misery, but she has alcohol to seemingly anaesthetize the pain, and it is incredibly painful to give up the illusion that if you try hard enough and get just a bit of a solace, things will be OK. That's a mighty hard thing to repent of: it's easier to rationalize, decide to give it up by sheer willpower (perhaps tomorrow), or make a bargain to cut back to a more reasonable level—anything but wake up and stop trying to ignore that you're standing barefoot in something really gross, and admit that what you need is not a bigger fan to drive away the stench while you stay where you are, but to step out in a cleaning operation that lasts a lifetime and cuts to your soul.

An alcoholic walking this path craves just a little bit of solace, just for now, and it is only much later that two things happen. First, the cravings are still hard, but they are no longer *quite* so overpowering. Second, she had forgotten what it felt like to be clean—really and truly *clean*—and she had forgotten what it was like to be doing something else with her life than trying to hide in a bottle. She had forgotten what freedom was like. And long after she gave up on her way of escaping life, she found she had forgotten what it was like to experience life, not as something to escape, but as something with joy even in its pain.

The gates of Hell are bolted and barred from the *inside*. This much is true of passion: we think our sins adorn us, and we try to flee from the only place joy is to be found. Fleshly lust disenchants the entire universe; first everything else becomes dull and uninteresting, and ultimately stronger doses of lust lose even the semblance of being interesting. Spiritual lust, the passion that seeks escape from where God has placed us is, if anything, a sin with a higher pay grade than the fleshly lust that is bad enough, but spiritual lust too is the disenchantment of reality, a set

of blinders that deflates all the beauty we are given in nature. Spiritual lust is the big brother of merely fleshly lust. Spiritual lust is something really, really, *really* gross that we need to step out of and get *clean*. We need to realize that the passion does not adorn us, that the sparkle of an exotic escape from a miserable here and now is, on a spiritual plane, spin doctoring for experiencing the here and now with despair. We do not see that we need not an escape from what God has given us, but gratitude and contentment.

But what if the here and now is not the best here and now? What if it's with an Uncle Wally who tells sexist jokes no matter how you ask him to stop? What if the people you are with have *real* warts? There are a couple of responses. You might also think of what your uncle has done that you might be grateful for. You know, like when he helped you find and buy your first car. Or you could learn the power of choosing to be joyful when others act unpleasantly. Or you might read C.S. Lewis, [The Trouble with X](#), and then look at how you might stand to profit from praying, with the Orthodox Church, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Once, when things went from hard times to easy times, one saint complained, saying that easy times rob the Church of her martyrs and her glory. If we are entering hard times, that does not place us outside of God's reach nor Christ's promise in [the Sermon on the Mount](#): "For your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

*I glorify Thee,
Who hast cast Adam out of Paradise,
That we might learn by the sweat of our brow
The joy and the life that Adam scorned
As King of Paradise.*

*Glory be to the Father
And to the Son and to the Holy Ghost
Both now and ever and unto the ages of ages.
Amen.*

*Glory forever.
And glory be to Thee,
Thou who blessest us
For better or for worse,
In sickness and in health,
In the Eternal Light and Love
Who illuminest marriage.*

*Glory forever.
Glory be to thee whose blessings are here,
Not in an escape,
But in the place wherein Thou hast placed us.*

*Glory forever.
Glory be to Thee,
Who offerest Eden,
To us men who forever dodge our salvation.*

*Glory forever.
Glory be to the Father
And to the Son and to the Holy Ghost
Both here and now, and in Eternal Life that beckons us
The Son of God became a man in his here and now in
Bethlehem.
In your forever honored place,
From this very moment,
Become a Son of God.
Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near,
Heaven awaits with open arms,
Step out of Hell.
Grieve for your sins,
That grief that holds more in her heart,
Than discovering that the scintillating escape from Hell
Scintillates only as a mirage.
And the repentance you fear,
So constricted it seems from outside,*

*Holds inside a treasure larger than the universe,
Older than time,
And more alive than life.
Glory beyond glory,
Life beyond life,
Light beyond life,
The Bread from Heaven,
The infinite Living Wine,
Who alone canst slake our infinite thirst,
Glory forever.*

Glory be to God on high.

Glory forever.

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy
Ghost,*

Both now and ever and unto the ages of ages,

Amen:

Glory forever.

Alleluia!

God the Game Changer

Some people wince at terms like *game changer* today the same way they winced in earlier years when they heard, "paradigm shift".

But the terms overuse suggests there might be something that triggered the buzz. When Apple introduced the Macintosh, they changed the scene, not only by causing a few Macintoshes to be sold, but by pushing a permanent shift for mainstream computers to be sold with Macintosh-style Windows, not the older command line MS-DOS. Apple may never have sold the same number of units as Microsoft, and they survived due to a Microsoft bailout, but once Apple introduced the Macintosh, Microsoft considered it non-negotiable to release Windows to compete with the Macintosh environment (even if Vista was a painful enough imitation MacOS to earn the scorn of Microsoft's usual fans). It may be in the end that Apple's biggest gift to the world of desktop computing is Windows: Apple's gift to desktop computing today is that you can now buy, as a mainstream choice, Windows 7 instead of something more like MS-DOS.

It is no longer a provocative statement that Apple's introduction of the iPhone may be a more profound game changer than the Macintosh. It may turn out, in the end,

that Apple's gift to mobile computing may be the Droid and Google-based smartphones—Verizon's "Before you choose a phone, choose a map", and, "iDon't"<http://CJSHayward.com/>"Droid does" marketing campaigns certainly reflect a realization on Verizon's part that shooing Apple away when Apple wanted Verizon to be the iPhone's exclusive carrier was perhaps not Verizon's best decision. But the iPhone changed the game profoundly enough that it was the gold standard everyone was trying to beat, and at least before the Droid, no "iPhone killer" even came close.

In both of these cases, Apple didn't offer their own brand of the existing options: while it was not the first graphical user interface, the Macintosh did not offer an attempt to improve on MS-DOS; it showed what a graphical user interface done right for desktop computing could look like. Likewise, the iPhone did not offer a miniaturized standard desktop environment like Windows Mobile, but it showed what mobile computing done right could look like. While the iPhone may no longer be the only phone that does mobile computing right, the Droid underscores that if you're going to beat Apple now, you need to beat it by the same game as Apple is playing in the iPhone. In neither of these cases did Apple try to beat Microsoft at its own game by providing a better MS-DOS, or a better Windows Mobile. Instead, *they changed the game.*

In our lives, we want God to help us struggle better at the games we are playing. What God wants to do is something different: to change the game.

God the Game Changer at work: A story

Every Lent, Orthodox remember a great saint with a great story. There was a very accomplished priest and monk who

was troubled by the idea that no one had gotten as far as him in ascesis (spiritual work). And he was sent to a monastery by the Jordan, where as the custom was, every Lent monks would go out into the desert. And after a while, he saw a person, and chased this person; after a time he asked for the other person to stop fleeing; the other person called him by name and asked for his cloak, since her clothes were long since gone. He was terrified.

She asked why a great ascetic like him could want to speak with a sinful woman like her. They bowed down and asked each other for a blessing; then she told him that he was a priest and he should bless her, terrifying him even more by knowing that he was a priest. Then they spoke, and the woman called herself a sinner without any single virtue, and asked him to pray. So they began to pray, and a long time the priest looked up and saw her above the ground, levitating. He fell to the ground, weeping in prayer. Then he asked her story.

The woman asked his prayers for her shamelessness; in modern terms, she was a sorority girl who majored in men, money, and margaritas, except worse. Much worse. She went to a religious festival, got to church, and a force kept her from going in. She tried to go around it, then prayed before an icon of Mary the Mother of God asking to be let in and then saying she would do whatever she was told. Then she was able to enter in; she worshipped, and returned to the icon and asked to be told what to do. Then a voice from on high said, "If you cross the Jordan, you will find glorious rest."

She was given some money and purchased three loaves of bread as she left, and then went, and struggled and struggled and struggled in what seemed like endless temptations and struggles. She had given free reign to her vices for seventeen years, and for seventeen years in the desert she wanted men, wanted wine and lewd songs,

wanted meat, and just kept on struggling. After a time—a long, *long* time—things got easier. And she had been living for almost half a century in the desert, eating desert plants and at the mercies of the elements. It came up in the conversation that she quoted from the Bible with understanding. The monk asked her if she had read them. She said she had never seen another person since making the journey, had no one to read holy books to her, and like most people then, she didn't know how to read. Then she alluded to Scripture and suggested that Christ the Word may teach by himself.

She told him he wouldn't be able to come the next year, but to come the year after and give her communion. The next year illness pinned him down, and the year after he went, then saw her on the other side of the river. She crossed herself and walked over the water. They met again like the first, and she asked him to come again in a year.

He returned in a year to find her dead, kissed her feet and washed them with his tears, and found written next to her her last request and her name, Mary. He didn't see how he would bury her, as per her request, but when he took a piece of wood and began to dig, an enormous lion approached, and at his command dug her grave. Then he and the lion went their separate ways, and per an earlier request, the monk addressed numerous things that needed correction. Somewhere along the way, he asked in perfectly good faith if she would return to the city. Her answer was that no, she would be returning to temptation and ruin all her work. Old woman as she was, she still couldn't handle the temptation of having all those young men around.

What can we learn from all this? In the Parable of the Talents, a master calls his servants and entrusts one with five "talents" (70 pound silver bars), one with two, and one with one talent. He returns and calls an account. The master commends the servant who was given five talents because

he has earned five more, and likewise commends the servant given two talents who has earned two more. Then the we hear a different tune ([Matthew 25:24-27](#)):

He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, "Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not winnow; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours."

But his master answered him, "You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sowed, and gather where I have not winnowed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest..."

This is a bit of a hard passage. The master represents God quite clearly, and this parable not only has the servant say that his master is (to use different words) cruel, but he harvests where he did not plant seeds and gathers where he has not scattered. Worse than that, the master, i.e. God, seems to endorse the portrayal. What are we to make of this?

One thought is that this is rhetorically abstaining from pressing a point. In other words, we could paraphrase the master's reply, "You wicked and slothful servant! Let's say for the sake of argument that I harvest where I did not plant seeds and gather where I have not scattered. Shouldn't you at least have invested it so I could have it back with interest?"

But in fact a deeper understanding is available, and it hinges on a question. What has God not sown? He created Heaven and earth, all things that can be seen and all things

that cannot be seen. The demons themselves were created by God; everything from the highest of the angels to the lowest grain of sand, from the greatest saint to the Devil is a creation of God. What then could there be that God hath not sown?

The answer is that God has not sown sin, nor suffering, nor evil, nor pain, nor sickness, nor death. He created the Devil, but not the rebellion of angels once created pure. God has not sown this; he has not scattered us out of the glory he intended for us. And he has not planted sin, nor suffering, nor evil, nor pain, nor sickness, nor death, but he harvests them.

The servant's accusation, which the master repeats, is that God is so intent on harvest that he harvests whether or not he has sown. The priest, monk, and *saint* Zosima is among the greatest of saints, and he lived a life of spiritual work and spiritually sober living before God. His life was full of seeds that God sowed, and probably from childhood. And God harvested Saint Zosima's good works. But Saint Zosima needed something. He needed to be knocked completely flat on his back.

But to stop here is to miss the glory of God the Game Changer. The woman in the desert did a great many things that God would never sow. She was a worse sinner than a prostitute. But God harvested her and her sins too, and when Zosima had reached a point where he did not know if there was his equal on earth, God showed Saint Zosima, "*Here is someone who leaves you completely in the dust.*"

Saint Mary wondered how many souls she ensnared. The answer is certainly, "Many," and this is tragic. But God harvested her sins, many as they were, and out of her person, her story, and her intercession God has helped innumerrably more people reach salvation. She is one of the greatest saints the Orthodox Church knows. And something is really destroyed in the story if you omit her numerous

sins of sexual self-violation.

And in all this, God changed the game. He did not tear up the fabric of time, but he harvested what was planted in her even more than what was planted in Saint Zosima. God harvests where he has sown, and God the Game Change also harvests where he has never sown. And when he does, he pushes the game to another level entirely.

A present-day example of God's game-changing, this time not with sin but with injury, is in the life of Joni Erickson. At a young age, Erickson dove the wrong way into shallow water and broke her neck, instantly paralyzing her in all four limbs. And she assuredly prayed what everybody who has such an accident prays if prayer is even considered: "Lord, heal me." And some people are healed, miraculously. But an entirely different, in a way deeper, miracle occurred with her. She adjusted to her loss and is a woman who has not only discovered that her life is still worth living, but has become a vibrant and well-known ambassador for the claim, "Even after a tragedy like mine, *life is still worth living.*" None of this would have happened if she had not suffered an injury that cost her the use of all four limbs. For that matter, none of this would have happened if God answered her prayers by giving her the supernatural healing she wanted. Instead, God changed the game. He answered her prayers, not by giving what she asked for, but by moving the game to the next level. God did not plant her injury, but he has harvested where he did not plant and gathered in where he never scattered.

More than a game change

The Gospel is the story of God changing the game. It was much more than Pharisees who did not recognize Christ; his own disciples seemed to have their eyes equally wide shut.

Christ's people looked for a military Messiah who would

deliver the Jews from Roman domination. Christ changed the game; he did not offer salvation as military deliverance, but salvation from sin. He didn't give people what they were looking for; he pushed the game to the next level.

Darkness reigned in the crucifixion of Christ. Something like a quarter to a third of the Gospels are devoted to Christ's passion. The message appears to be very clear: "But this is your hour—when darkness reigns" (Luke 22:53 NIV). *Game over. All hope is lost.*

Yet this profound evil is precisely what God harvested treasure beyond all beauty. In [I Corinthians 15](#) Saint Paul writes,

But some one will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" You foolish man! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. For not all flesh is alike, but there is one kind for men, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are celestial bodies and there are terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam

became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. I tell you this, brethren: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?"

And Saint Paul knew a game change in his own life. English translations seem to put this point much more delicately, but Saint Paul, earlier in this chapter, compares himself to a miscarried child, as the least of the Apostles. He almost seems to be saying, "If there's hope for me, there's hope for anybody." And yet God harvested from what was sown in this persecutor of the Church.

The Resurrection is the ultimate game-changing move. Saint John Chrysostom's famous resurrection homily proclaims:

Let no one bewail his poverty,

For the universal Kingdom has been revealed.
Let no one weep for his iniquities,
For pardon has shown forth from the grave.
Let no one fear death,
For the Saviour's death has set us free.
He that was held prisoner of it has annihilated it.

By descending into Hell, He made Hell captive.
He embittered it when it tasted of His flesh.
And Isaiah, foretelling this, did cry:
Hell, said he, was embittered
When it encountered Thee in the lower regions.

It was embittered, for it was abolished.
It was embittered, for it was mocked.
It was embittered, for it was slain.
It was embittered, for it was overthrown.
It was embittered, for it was fettered in chains.
It took a body, and met God face to face.
It took earth, and encountered Heaven.
It took that which was seen, and fell upon the
unseen.

O Death, where is thy sting?
O Hell, where is thy victory?

Christ is risen, and thou art overthrown!
Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen!
Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice!
Christ is risen, and life reigns!
Christ is risen, and not one dead remains in the
grave.
For Christ, being risen from the dead,
Is become the first-fruits of those who have fallen
asleep.

To Him be glory and dominion
Unto ages of ages.

Amen.

We would do well to remember the scene a short distance after the funereal scene of joy turned to weeping at the death of King Caspian in [Prince Caspian](#):

"Look here! I say," he stammered. "It's all very well. But aren't you—? I mean didn't you—"

"Oh, don't be such an ass," said [King] Caspian.

"But," said Eustace, looking at Aslan. "Hasn't he—er—died?"

"Yes," said the Lion in a very quiet voice, almost (Jill thought) as if he were laughing. "He has died. Most people have, you know. Even I have. There are very few who haven't."

Earlier in the Gospel, in Luke chapter 7, there is a scene where a widow's only son is carried out on a bier, and Christ says something truly strange: before doing anything else, he tells her not to weep. He is speaking to a woman who has been twice bereaved, and with her last bereavement went her source of support. And he tells her, "Weep not!" He then goes on to raise her son from the dead. That isn't what is happening in Christ's resurrection.

Christ, the firstborn of the dead, opened death as one opening the womb. And he himself was sown a natural body and is raised a spiritual body. And God did more than simply flip the switch and make Christ's body like it was before death. The marks of crucifixion remain imprinted on his body as Joni Eareckson Tada remains quadriplegic. But Christ moved forward in triumph. He remains forever

imprinted with the marks of death suffered for our sakes, and he bears them as his trophy. His victory as God the Game Changer takes us, harvesting what he has sown in our good deeds and our repentance, and what he has not sown in our sins and in evils that happen to us, and alike transforms us as trophies in his wake. Christ God is victor over both sin and death, and this victory is not just something that could be ours at Judgment Day; it is the central reality of day to day life. Saint Seraphim would greet people with the Paschal greeting year round: "Christ is risen, my joy!" While that is not the usual Orthodox custom, that he did so is entirely fitting and not in any sense an exaggeration of the Resurrection's importance. The Resurrection, the greatest act yet of God the Game Changer, is what God will do on a smaller scale in our lives. God sometimes gives us victory in the game we are playing, and sometimes changes the game and pushes us to the next level. It may be a painful and difficult process; it may involve loss and any amount of bewilderment. But when we seem to have lost, it may just be God the Game Changer's power at work.

Christ is risen, His joy!

God the Spiritual Father

I believe in one God, the Father, Almighty...

The Nicene Creed

All of us do the will of God. The question is not whether we do God's will or not, but whether we do God's will as *instruments*, as Satan and Judas did, or as *sons*, as Peter and John did. In the end Satan may be nothing more than a hammer in the hand of God.

C.S. Lewis, paraphrased

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.

[Proverbs](#)

My precious, precious child, I love you and will never leave you. When you see one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you.

[Footprints](#), paraphrased

Look to every situation as if you were going to bargain at the market, always looking to make a spiritual profit.

The Philokalia, paraphrased

For it was fitting that God, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make Christ the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering.

Hebrews

There are a lot of concerns on people's minds. For those of us in the U.S., we've been facing an economic disaster. Is "the decade from Hell" over and done? Or has the economic depression just begun? Has the *real* nightmare just *begun*? People have faced unemployment, and some are worried about hyper-inflation. And the big question on almost everyone's mind is, "Can I survive this? And if so, how?" And these quotes have something to say to the billion dollar question on almost everyone's mind.

Let's turn the clock back a bit, to 1755. There was a catastrophic earthquake in Lisbonne in Portugal, and its untold misery shook people's faith in the goodness of the world we live in. In the questioning that came afterwards, Voltaire wrote *Candide* in which the rather ludicrous teacher Pangloss is always explaining that we live in "the best of all possible worlds:" no matter what misfortune or disaster befell them, the unshakable Pangloss would always find a way to explain that we still lived in the best of all possible worlds. And Voltaire's point is to rip that preposterous idea apart, giving a dose of reality and showing what the misery in Lisbonne made painfully clear: we do *not* live in the best of all possible worlds. Far from it. But there is another shoe to drop.

We do not live in the best of all possible worlds. Far from it. But we live under the care of the best of all possible Gods, and it is a more profound truth, a more vibrant truth, a truth that goes much deeper into the heart of root of all things to say that we may not live in the best of all possible worlds, but *we live under the care of the best of all possible Gods*.

Once we have truly grasped that God the Spiritual Father is the best of all possible Gods, it becomes a mistake to focus on how, in fact, we simply do not live in the best of all possible worlds. Perhaps we all need to repent and recognize that we ourselves are far from being the best of all possible *people*. But we need to raise our eyes higher: raise our eyes and see that our lives and our world are under the love of the best of all possible Gods: God the Spiritual Father.

The Orthodox Church has understood this since ancient times. Let's read some longer quotes:

We ought all of us always to thank God for both the universal and the particular gifts of soul and body that He bestows on us. The universal gifts consist of the four elements and all that comes into being through them, as well as all the marvelous works of God mentioned in the divine Scriptures. The particular gifts consist of all that God has given to each individual. These include:

- Wealth, so that one can perform acts of charity.
- Poverty, so that one can endure it with patience and gratitude.
- Authority, so that one can exercise righteous judgment and establish virtue.

- Obedience and service, so that one can more readily attain salvation of soul.
- Health, so that one can assist those in need and undertake work worthy of God.
- Sickness, so that one may earn the crown of patience.
- Spiritual knowledge and strength, so that one may acquire virtue.
- Weakness and ignorance, so that, turning one's back on worldly things, one may be under obedience in stillness and humility.
- Unsought loss of goods and possessions, so that one may deliberately seek to be saved and may even be helped when incapable of shedding all one's possessions or even of giving alms.
- Ease and prosperity, so that one may voluntarily struggle and suffer to attain the virtues and thus become dispassionate and fit to save other souls.
- Trials and hardship, so that those who cannot eradicate their own will may be saved in spite of themselves, and those capable of joyful endurance may attain perfection.

All these things, even if they are opposed to each other, are nevertheless good when used correctly; but when misused, they are not good, but are

harmful for both soul and body.

The Philokalia

He who wants to be an imitator of Christ, so that he too may be called a son of God, born of the Spirit, must above all bear courageously and patiently the afflictions he encounters, whether these be bodily illnesses, slander and vilification from men, or attacks from the unseen spirits. God in His providence allows souls to be tested by various afflictions of this kind, so that it may be revealed which of them truly loves Him. All the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and martyrs from the beginning of time traversed none other than this narrow road of trial and affliction, and it was by doing this that they fulfilled God's will. 'My son,' says Scripture, 'if you come to serve the Lord, prepare your soul for trial, set your heart straight, and patiently endure' (Ecclus. 2 : 1-2). And elsewhere it is said: 'Accept everything that comes as good, knowing that nothing occurs without God willing it.' Thus the soul that wishes to do God's will must strive above all to acquire patient endurance and hope. For one of the tricks of the devil is to make us listless at times of affliction, so that we give up our hope in the Lord. God never allows a soul that hopes in Him to be so oppressed by trials that it is put to utter confusion. As St Paul writes: 'God is to be trusted not to let us be tried beyond our strength, but with the trial He will provide a way out, so that we are able to bear it (I Cor. 10 : 13). The devil harasses the soul not as much as he wants but as much as God allows him to. Men know what burden may be placed on a mule, what on a donkey, and what on a camel, and load each

beast accordingly; and the potter knows how long he must leave pots in the fire, so that they are not cracked by staying in it too long or rendered useless by being taken out of it before they are properly fired. If human understanding extends this far, must not God be much more aware, infinitely more aware, of the degree of trial it is right to impose on each soul, so that it becomes tried and true, fit for the kingdom of heaven?

Hemp, unless it is well beaten, cannot be worked into fine yarn, while the more it is beaten and carded the finer and more serviceable it becomes. And a freshly moulded pot that has not been fired is of no use to man. And a child not yet proficient in worldly skills cannot build, plant, sow seed or perform any other worldly task. In a similar manner it often happens through the Lord's goodness that souls, on account of their childlike innocence, participate in divine grace and are filled with the sweetness and repose of the Spirit; but because they have not yet been tested, and have not been tried by the various afflictions of the evil spirits, they are still immature and not yet fit for the kingdom of heaven. As the apostle says: 'If you have not been disciplined you are bastards and not sons' (Heb. 12 : 8). Thus trials and afflictions are laid upon a man in the way that is best for him, so as to make his soul stronger and more mature; and if the soul endures them to the end with hope in the Lord it cannot fail to attain the promised reward of the Spirit and deliverance from the evil passions.

The Philokalia

All These Things Were From Me

(The new St. Seraphim, of Viritsa was born in 1866. He married and had three children. In 1920, at the age of 54, he and his wife quietly separated and each entered monastic life. Eventually he became the spiritual father of the St. Alexander Nevsky Lavra in St. Petersburg, where, as a clairvoyant staretz, he also confessed thousands of laity. He said, "I am the storage room where people's afflictions gather." In imitation of his patron saint, he prayed for a thousand nights on a rock before an icon of St. Seraphim of Sarov. He reposed in the Lord in 1949 and the Church of Russia glorified him in August of 2000.)

The following is (slightly abridged) from a letter sent by St. Seraphim to a spiritual child of his, a hierarch who was at that time in a Soviet prison. It is in the form of consolation given by God to a troubled man's soul.

St. Seraphim of Viritsa

Have you ever thought that everything that concerns you, concerns Me, also? You are precious in my eyes and I love you; for his reason, it is a special joy for Me to train you. When temptations and the opponent [the Evil One] come upon you like a river, I want you to know that This was from Me.

I want you to know that your weakness has need of My strength, and your safety lies in allowing Me to protect you. I want you to know that when you are in difficult conditions, among people who

do not understand you, and cast you away, This was from Me.

I am your God, the circumstances of your life are in My hands; you did not end up in your position by chance; this is precisely the position I have appointed for you. Weren't you asking Me to teach you humility? And there - I placed you precisely in the "school" where they teach this lesson. Your environment, and those who are around you, are performing My will. Do you have financial difficulties and can just barely survive? Know that This was from Me.

I want you to know that I dispose of your money, so take refuge in Me and depend upon Me. I want you to know that My storehouses are inexhaustible, and I am faithful in My promises. Let it never happen that they tell you in your need, "Do not believe in your Lord and God." Have you ever spent the night in suffering? Are you separated from your relatives, from those you love? I allowed this that you would turn to Me, and in Me find consolation and comfort. Did your friend or someone to whom you opened your heart, deceive you? This was from Me.

I allowed this frustration to touch you so that you would learn that your best friend is the Lord. I want you to bring everything to Me and tell Me everything. Did someone slander you? Leave it to Me; be attached to Me so that you can hide from the "contradiction of the nations." I will make your righteousness shine like light and your life like midday noon. Your plans were destroyed? Your soul yielded and you are exhausted? This was from Me.

You made plans and have your own goals; you brought them to Me to bless them. But I want you to leave it all to Me, to direct and guide the circumstances of your life by My hand, because you are the orphan, not the protagonist. Unexpected failures found you and despair overcame your heart, but know That this was from Me.

With tiredness and anxiety I am testing how strong your faith is in My promises and your boldness in prayer for your relatives. Why is it not you who entrusted their cares to My providential love? You must leave them to the protection of My All Pure Mother. Serious illness found you, which may be healed or may be incurable, and has nailed you to your bed. This was from Me.

Because I want you to know Me more deeply, through physical ailment, do not murmur against this trial I have sent you. And do not try to understand My plans for the salvation of people's souls, but uncomplainingly and humbly bow your head before My goodness. You were dreaming about doing something special for Me and, instead of doing it, you fell into a bed of pain. This was from Me.

Because then you were sunk in your own works and plans and I wouldn't have been able to draw your thoughts to Me. But I want to teach you the most deep thoughts and My lessons, so that you may serve Me. I want to teach you that you are nothing without Me. Some of my best children are those who, cut off from an active life, learn to use the weapon of ceaseless prayer. You were

called unexpectedly to undertake a difficult and responsible position, supported by Me. I have given you these difficulties and as the Lord God I will bless all your works, in all your paths. In everything I, your Lord, will be your guide and teacher. Remember always that every difficulty you come across, every offensive word, every slander and criticism, every obstacle to your works, which could cause frustration and disappointment, This is from Me.

Know and remember always, no matter where you are, That whatsoever hurts will be dulled as soon as you learn In all things, to look at Me. Everything has been sent to you by Me, for the perfection of your soul.

All these things were from Me.

St. Seraphim of Viritsa

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of

God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right

hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Romans

We may be entering an economic depression. We live in hard times, and things may get much harder. It is becoming more and more clear that this is no mere recession: it looks more and more like a depression. We see people asking, "Where is God when it hurts?" And there is something important about the answer to "Where is God when it hurts?": something very important, something profoundly important.

I believe in one God, the *Spiritual* Father Almighty.

I'm not sure how to explain this without saying something about Orthodox monasticism, but the Orthodox concept of a *spiritual father* is of someone one owes obedience in everything, and who normally assigns some things that are very difficult to do, unpleasant, and painful. And this seems a strange thing to be getting into. But there is method to what may seem mad: we do not reach our greatest good, we do not flourish, we do not reach our highest heights, if we are the spiritual equivalent of spoiled children. And the entire point of this duty of obedience is to arrange things for

the good of the person who obeys in this situation. *The entire point of obedience in what the spiritual father arranges is for the spiritual father as a spiritual physician to give health and freedom through the disciple's obedience.*

In that sense, only monks and nuns are expected to have spiritual fathers to shape them. The rest of us have God as our Spiritual Father, and we can kick against the goads, but God the Spiritual Father is at work in every person we meet. *God the Spiritual Father is God the Great Physician, working everything for our health and freedom if we will cooperate.* People and situations he sends us may be part of his will for us as instruments, or they may be part of his will for us as sons of God, but God's will unfolds in each person who acts in our lives: kind people and cruel, having excess and having lack, getting our way and having our will cut short as a spiritual father does to form a monk under his care, becomes part of the work of God the Spiritual Father. Even economic nightmares become part of "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose."

When God gives us our true good, *nothing* can take it away.

What exactly is our true good unfolds in [the saints' lives, which are well worth reading](#): many of them lived in great hardship. Some were martyred; [the beloved St. Nectarios](#) lost his job repeatedly for reasons that were not just unfortunate, but completely and absolutely unfair. God was still at work in his life, and he is now crowned as a saint in Heaven. God allowed things to happen, terrible things to happen, but not one of them took him away from God giving him everything he needed and ultimately working in him the glory of one of the greatest saints in recent times.

[The Sermon on the Mount](#) says some harsh words about how we use money, but these words set the stage for a profound treasure that we can still have, even in an

economic depression:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, [*or, today, where economic havoc can ruin our financial planning*] but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal [*or, today, where your treasures cannot be taken away even by a complete economic meltdown*].

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also...

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Money.

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith?

Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'

For the godless seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.

Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will have its own worries. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

The life of St. Philaret the Merciful speaks volumes:

Righteous Philaret the Merciful, son of George and Anna, was raised in piety and the fear of God. He lived during the eighth century in the village of Amneia in the Paphlagonian district of Asia Minor. His wife, Theoseba, was from a rich and illustrious family, and they had three children: a son John, and daughters Hypatia and Evanthia.

Philaret was a rich and illustrious dignitary, but he did not hoard his wealth. Knowing that many people suffered from poverty, he remembered the words of the Savior about the dread Last Judgment and about "these least ones" (Mt. 25:40); the the Apostle Paul's reminder that we will take nothing with us from this world (1 Tim 6:7); and the assertion of King David that the righteous would not be forsaken (Ps 36/37:25). Philaret, whose name means "lover of virtue," was famed for his love for the poor.

One day Ishmaelites [Arabs] attacked

Paphlagonia, devastating the land and plundering the estate of Philaret. There remained only two oxen, a donkey, a cow with her calf, some beehives, and the house. But he also shared them with the poor. His wife reproached him for being heartless and unconcerned for his own family. Mildly, yet firmly he endured the reproaches of his wife and the jeers of his children. "I have hidden away riches and treasure," he told his family, "so much that it would be enough for you to feed and clothe yourselves, even if you lived a hundred years without working."

The saint's gifts always brought good to the recipient. Whoever received anything from him found that the gift would multiply, and that person would become rich. Knowing this, a certain man came to St Philaret asking for a calf so that he could start a herd. The cow missed its calf and began to bellow. Theoseba said to her husband, "You have no pity on us, you merciless man, but don't you feel sorry for the cow? You have separated her from her calf." The saint praised his wife, and agreed that it was not right to separate the cow and the calf. Therefore, he called the poor man to whom he had given the calf and told him to take the cow as well.

That year there was a famine, so St Philaret took the donkey and went to borrow six bushels of wheat from a friend of his. When he returned home, a poor man asked him for a little wheat, so he told his wife to give the man a bushel. Theoseba said, "First you must give a bushel to each of us in the family, then you can give away the rest as you choose." Philaretos then gave the

man two bushels of wheat. Theoseba said sarcastically, "Give him half the load so you can share it." The saint measured out a third bushel and gave it to the man. Then Theoseba said, "Why don't you give him the bag, too, so he can carry it?" He gave him the bag. The exasperated wife said, "Just to spite me, why not give him all the wheat." St Philaret did so.

Now the man was unable to lift the six bushels of wheat, so Theoseba told her husband to give him the donkey so he could carry the wheat home. Blessing his wife, Philaret gave the donkey to the man, who went home rejoicing. Theoseba and the children wept because they were hungry.

The Lord rewarded Philaret for his generosity: when the last measure of wheat was given away, a old friend sent him forty bushels. Theoseba kept most of the wheat for herself and the children, and the saint gave away his share to the poor and had nothing left. When his wife and children were eating, he would go to them and they gave him some food. Theoseba grumbled saying, "How long are you going to keep that treasure of yours hidden? Take it out so we can buy food with it."

During this time the Byzantine empress Irene (797-802) was seeking a bride for her son, the future emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitos (780-797). Therefore, emissaries were sent throughout all the Empire to find a suitable girl, and the envoys came to Amneia.

When Philaret and Theoseba learned that these

most illustrious guests were to visit their house, Philaret was very happy, but Theoseba was sad, for they did not have enough food. But Philaret told his wife to light the fire and to decorate their home. Their neighbors, knowing that imperial envoys were expected, brought everything required for a rich feast.

The envoys were impressed by the saint's daughters and granddaughters. Seeing their beauty, their deportment, their clothing, and their admirable qualities, the envoys agreed that Philaret's granddaughter, Maria was exactly what they were looking for. This Maria exceeded all her rivals in quality and modesty and indeed became Constantine's wife, and the emperor rewarded Philaret.

Thus fame and riches returned to Philaret. But just as before, this holy lover of the poor generously distributed alms and provided a feast for the poor. He and his family served them at the meal. Everyone was astonished at his humility and said: "This is a man of God, a true disciple of Christ."

He ordered a servant to take three bags and fill one with gold, one with silver, and one with copper coins. When a beggar approached, Philaret ordered his servant to bring forth one of the bags, whichever God's providence would ordain. Then he would reach into the bag and give to each person, as much as God willed.

St Philaret refused to wear fine clothes, nor would he accept any imperial rank. He said it was

enough for him to be called the grandfather of the Empress. The saint reached ninety years of age and knew his end was approaching. He went to the Rodolpheia ("The Judgment") monastery in Constantinople. He gave some gold to the Abbess and asked her to allow him to be buried there, saying that he would depart this life in ten days.

He returned home and became ill. On the tenth day he summoned his family, he exhorted them to imitate his love for the poor if they desired salvation. Then he fell asleep in the Lord. He died in the year 792 and was buried in the Rodolpheia Judgment monastery in Constantinople.

The appearance of a miracle after his death confirmed the sainthood of Righteous Philaret. As they bore the body of the saint to the cemetery, a certain man, possessed by the devil, followed the funeral procession and tried to overturn the coffin. When they reached the grave, the devil threw the man down on the ground and went out of him. Many other miracles and healings also took place at the grave of the saint.

After the death of the righteous Philaret, his wife Theoseba worked at restoring monasteries and churches devastated during a barbarian invasion.

This merciful saint trusted God the Spiritual Father. He cashed in on the promise, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his perfect righteousness, and all these things shall be given to you as well."

In terms of [how to survive an economic depression](#), the

right question to ask is *not*, "Do I have enough treasures stored up on earth?" but "Do I have enough treasures in Heaven?" And the merciful St. Philaret lived a life out of abundant treasure in Heaven.

The biggest thing we need right now is to know the point of life, which is to live the life of Heaven, not starting at death, but starting here on earth. C.S. Lewis lectured to students on the eve of World War II when it looked like Western civilization was on the verge of permanent collapse. I won't try to repeat what he said beyond "Life has never been normal" and add that God's providence is for difficult circumstances every bit as much as when life seems normal. God's providence is how we can survive an economic depression. [The Sermon on the Mount](#) is no mere wish list only for when life that is perfect; it is meant for God's work with us even in circumstances we would not choose, *especially* in circumstances we would not choose, and speaks of the love of God the Spiritual Father who can and will work with us in an economic depression, if we will let him, and work with us no less than when life is easy.

(Some have said not only that God provides in rough times as well as easy times, but that God's providence is in fact clearer in rough times, such as an economic depression, than when things go our way and we can forget that we need a bit of help from above.)

God the Spiritual Father wants to use everything for our good. Everything he allows, everything in our lives, is either a blessing or a temptation that has been allowed for our strengthening. His purpose even in allowing rough things to happen is to help us grow up spiritually, and to make us Heavenly. [The Great Divorce](#) imagines a busload of people come from Hell to visit Heaven, and what happens is something much like what happens in our lives: they are offered Heaven and they do not realize Heaven is better than the seeds Hell that they keep clinging to because they

are afraid to let go. Heaven and Hell are both real, but God does not send people to Hell. C.S. Lewis quotes someone saying that there are two kinds of people in this world: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, "*Thy* will be done," respecting their choice to choose Hell after Heaven has been freely offered to them. The gates of Hell are bolted and barred from the inside. Hellfire is nothing other than the Light of Heaven as experienced by those who reject the only possibility for living joy there is. And neither the reality of Heaven nor the state of mind we call Hell begins after death; their seeds grow on us in this training ground we call life. We can become saints, heavenly people like St. Philaret, or we can care only about ourselves and our own survival. God the Spiritual Father wants to shape us to be part of the beauty of Heaven, and everything he sends us is intended for that purpose. But in freedom he will let us veto his blessings and choose to be in Hell.

Heaven is generous, and that generosity was something Heavenly that shone during the Great Depression. People who had very little shared. They shared money or food, if they had any. (And even if you have no money to share, you can share time; if you do not have a job, you can still volunteer.) St. Philaret shared because he knew something: "Knowing that many people suffered from poverty, he remembered the words of the Savior about the dread Last Judgment and about 'these least ones' (Mt. 25:40)..." In this part of the saint's life, the reference is to some of the most chilling words following [The Sermon on the Mount](#) in the Gospel:

When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right

hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?"

And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."

Then he will say to those at his left hand, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me." Then they also will answer, "Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?"

Then he will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me."

And they will go away into eternal punishment,
but the righteous into eternal life.

St. Philaret the Merciful will be greeted before Christ's awesome judgment seat and hear, "Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I came to you and asked for a little wheat, and you gave me all six bushels you had, and your only donkey with them." God did provide, but the reward is not just that a friend gave him forty bushels of wheat. The ultimate reward is that Christ regards how St. Philaret treated other people as how he treated Christ himself, and because St. Philaret was merciful, there is a reward for him in Heaven, a reward so great that next to it, the forty bushels of wheat from his friend utterly pale in comparison.

Remember this next time you see a beggar. If you can't give a quarter, at least see if there is a kind word or a prayer you can give. This has everything to do with [how to survive an economic depression](#).

We are at a time with terrible prospects for earthly comfort, but take heart. Let me again quote Lewis: "Heaven cannot give earthly comfort, and earth cannot give earthly comfort either. In the end, Heavenly comfort is the only comfort to be had. To quote from my own [Silence: Organic Food for the Soul](#):

Do you worry? Is it terribly hard
to get all your ducks in a row,
to get yourself to a secure place
where you have prepared for what might
happen?
Or does it look like you might lose your job,
if you still have one?
[The Sermon on the Mount](#)
urges people to pray,
"Give us this day our daily bread,"

in an economy
when unlike many homeless in the U.S. today,
it was not obvious to many
where they would get their next meal.
And yet it was this [Sermon on the Mount](#)
that tells us our Heavenly Father will provide for
us,
and tells us not to worry:
what we miss
if we find this a bit puzzling,
we who may have bank accounts, insurance,
investments
even if they are jeopardized right now,
is that we are like a child with some clay,
trying to satisfy ourselves by making a clay horse,
with clay that never cooperates, never looks
right,
and obsessed with clay that is never good
enough,
we ignore and maybe fear
the finger tapping us on our shoulder
until with great trepidation we turn,
and listen to the voice say,
"Stop trying so hard. Let it go,"
and follow our father
as he gives us a warhorse.

This life is an apprenticeship, and even now, when we may be in situations we do not like, God is asking us to be apprentices, learning to be knights riding the warhorse he gives us *even in the situations we might not like*. The life of Heaven begins on earth, *even in an economic depression*.

However much power world leaders may have, God the Spiritual Father is sovereign, and their summits pale in comparison for the work God the Spiritual Father is working even now.

Why do the nations conspire,
and the peoples plot in vain?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
and the rulers take counsel together,
against the LORD and his Christ, saying,
"Let us rip apart their religious restrictions,
and throw off their shackles."
He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the LORD has them in derision.

Psalms

For the conqueror says: "By the strength of my hand I have done it, and by my wisdom, for I have understanding; I have removed the boundaries of peoples, and have plundered their treasures; like a bull I have brought down those who sat on thrones. My hand has found like a nest the wealth of the peoples; and as men gather eggs that have been forsaken so I have gathered all the earth; and there was none that moved a wing, or opened the mouth, or chirped."

Shall the axe vaunt itself over him who hews with it, or the saw magnify itself against him who wields it? As if a rod should wield him who lifts it, or as if a staff should lift him who is not wood!

Isaiah

World leaders may work his will as instruments or as sons, but they will always work his will. This is true in an economic depression as much as any other time. God the Spiritual Father rules the world as sovereign on a deeper level than we can imagine, and he works good out of everything to those who love him and are called according

to his purpose to make them sons of God.

Some people really hope that if the right government programs are in place, we can get back on track to a better life. But even if governments have their place, "Put not your trust in princes," or rather, "Do not put your trust in governments," is not obsolete. Far from it: government initiatives cannot make everything better, even in the long haul, even with lots of time, sacrifices, and resources. But having given that bad news, I have good news too. Even if government initiatives fail to do what we want them to, we have God the Spiritual Father trying to give us the greatest good, and the time he offers us his will does not start sometime in the future: it is for *here*, and it is for **now**. He works his will alike through instruments like Satan and Judas, and sons like Peter and John, but in either case he works his will now, not sometime in the future when some human effort starts achieving results. Again, "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will."

God and the Son of God became Man and the Son of Man that man might become god and the sons of God.

St. Maximus Confessor

There was one time when two theology professors were talking when the weather was very rough. One of them said, "This is the day that the Lord has made," and the other said, "Well, he's done better!" And the joke may be funny, but sun and rain, heat and cold, are all given by God. We miss something if we only think God is working with us if it is warm and sunny, if we find ourselves in a violent storm and assume God must have abandoned us, if it seems that God can't or won't help us because the weather is so bad.

And we are missing something if we look at the news and the world around us, and want to say, "This is the day that the Lord has made... he's done better!"

If we are in an economic depression, say, "This is the day that the Lord has made." You're missing something if you need to add, "Well, he's done better!"

A friend quoted to me when I was in a rough spot,

"Life's Tapestry"

Behind those golden clouds up there
the Great One sews a priceless embroidery
and since down below we walk
we see, my child, the reverse view.
And consequently it is natural for the mind to see
mistakes
there where one must give thanks and glorify.

Wait as a Christian for that day to come
where your soul a-wing will rip through the air
and you shall see the embroidery of God
from the good side
and then... everything will seem to you to be a
system and order.

And it is true. It is not just, as some have said, that *God's address is at the end of your rope*. That is where you meet God best. It may be easier, not harder, to find God and his providential care in an economic depression. God is working a plan of eternal glory. Westminster opens with the great question, "What is the chief end of man?" and answers, "To glorify God and enjoy him forever." But there is a deeper answer. *The chief end of man is to become Christ*. The chief end of man is to become by grace what Christ is by nature. God and the Son of God became Man and the Son of Man that man and the sons of man might

become gods and the sons of God. The Son of God became a man that men might become the sons of God. The divine became human that the human might become divine. This saying has rumbled down through the ages: not only the entire point of being human, but the entire point of each and every circumstance God the Spiritual Father allows to come to us, as a blessing or as a temptation allowed for our strengthening, as God's will working through instruments or sons, is to make us share in Christ's divinity, and [the saints' lives](#) show few saints who met this purpose when everything went their way, and a great many where God worked in them precisely in rough and painful circumstances. If we watch the news and say, "This is the day the Lord has made. Well, he's done better," try to open your eyes to the possibility that "Well, he's done better" is what people want to say when, in the words of C.S. Lewis in [The Chronicles of Narnia](#), "*Aslan is on the move.*"

Christ's Incarnation is humble. It began humbly, in the scandalous pregnancy of an unwed teen mother, and it unfolds humbly in our lives. Its humble unfolding in our lives comes perhaps best when we have rough times and rough lives, in circumstances we would not choose, in an economic depression above all. You do not understand Christ's Incarnation unless you understand that it is an Incarnation in humility, humble times, and humble conditions. You do not understand Christ's humble Incarnation until you understand that it did not stop when the Mother of God's scandalous pregnancy began: Christ's humble Incarnation unfolds and unfurls in the Church, in the Saints, and Christ wishes to be Incarnate in every one of us. Christ wishes to be Incarnate in all of us, not in the circumstances we would choose for ourselves, but in the circumstances we are in, when God the Spiritual Father works everything to good for his sons.

Take heart if this sounds hard, like a tall order to live up to. It is hard for me too. It is hard, very hard, or at least it is for

me. But it is worth trying to live up to. Even if we do not always succeed.

God became man that man might become God. In whatever circumstances God gives us to train us, as God the Spiritual Father, let us grow as sons of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

The Horn of Joy: A Meditation on Eternity and Time, Kairos and Chronos

As I write, I am in a couch in a large parlor looking out on an atrium with over a dozen marble pillars, onto another parlor on the other side. I have spent the day wandering around a college campus and enjoying the exploration. I've gotten little of the homework done that I meant to do (reading and writing about a theologian), and spent most of my energies trying to dodge the sense that the best way to explain what I want to explain about time is to begin with a classical form of alchemy. (The other alternative to lead into the discussion would be to start talking about Augustine, but that could more easily create a false familiarity. Alchemy is a more jarring image.)

Alchemy is one of those subjects most people learn about by rumor, which means in that case that almost everything we "know" about it is false. Trying to understand it through today's ideas of science, magic, and proto-science is like trying to understand nonfiction reference materials, like an

encyclopedia, through the categories of fiction and poetry, or conversely trying to understand fictional and poetic works through (the non-fiction parts of) the Dewey Decimal system.

It is much more accurate to say that alchemy is a particular religious tradition, perhaps a flawed religious tradition, which was meant to transform its practitioners and embrace matter in the process. It may be rejected as heresy, but it is impossible to really understand heresy until you understand that heresy is impressively similar to orthodox Christianity, confusingly similar, and 'heresy' does *not* mean "the absolute opposite of what Christians believe." (Heresy is *far* more seductive than that.) Perhaps you may have heard the rumor that alchemists sought to turn lead into gold. The verdict on this historical urban legend, as with many urban legends, is, "Yes, *but...*"

Alchemy sought a way to turn lead into gold, but it has absolutely nothing to offer the greedy person who wants money to indulge his greed. Alchemy is scarcely more about turning lead into gold than astronomy is about telescopes. A telescope is a tool an astronomer uses to observe his real quarry, the stars as best they can be observed, and the alchemist, who sought to make matter into spirit and spirit into matter was trying to establish a spiritual bond with the matter so that the metals were incorporated into the person being performed. An Orthodox Christian might say the alchemist was seeking to be transfigured, even if that was a spiritually toxic way of seeking transfiguration or transformation—which is to say that the alchemist sought a profound and spiritual good. The alchemist sought gold that was above 24 karat purity, which is absurd if you think in today's material terms about a karat gold that was chemically up to 100% (24k) pure... but what we call a "chemist" today is the successor to what alchemists called "charcoal blowers", and chemistry today is a more sophisticated form of what the "charcoal blowers" were

doing, not the alchemists. But the desire for purer-than-24k-gold becomes a much clearer and more intelligible desire when you understand that gold was not seen by the alchemists as simply a "container" for economic value, but the most noble substance in the material world. (And a "material" world that is not just "material" as Americans today would understand it.) If you look at Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount about "Store up treasures in Heaven," and "Do not store up treasures on earth," the alchemists' desire to transmute metals and eventually produce gold is much more of a treasure in Heaven than merely a treasure on earth. (Think about why it is better to have a heart of gold and no merely physical gold than have all the merely physical gold in the world and a heart of ice with it.)

Newton, introduced to me as one of the greatest physicists, spent more time on alchemy than on the science he is remembered for today. He was also, among other things, an incredibly abrasive person and proof that while alchemy promises spiritual transformation it at least sometimes fails miserably, and there are a lot of other scathing things one could say about alchemy that I will refrain from saying. But I would like to suggest one way we could learn something from the alchemists:

When I wanted to explain the term "charcoal blower" by giving a good analogy for it, I searched and searched and couldn't find the same kind of pejorative term today. I don't mean that I couldn't find another epithet that was equally abrasive; we have insults just as insulting. But I couldn't find another term that was pejorative *for the same reason*. The closest parallels I found (and they were reasonably close parallels) to what lie behind the name of "charcoal blower" would be how a serious artist would see a colleague who produced mercenary propaganda for the highest bidder, or how a clergyman who chose the ministry to love God and serve his neighbor would view people who entered

the clergy for prestige and power over others. (It may be a sign of a problem on our side that while we can understand why people might be offended in these cases, we do not (as the alchemists did) have a term that embodies that reprobation. The alchemists called proto-chemists "charcoal blowers" because the alchemists had a pulse.)

To an alchemist, a "charcoal blower" was someone merely interested in what we would today call the science of chemistry and its applications—and someone who completely failed to pursue spiritual purification. Calling someone a "charcoal blower" is akin to calling someone an "irreligious, power hungry minister." Whether they were right in this estimation or not, alchemists would not have recognized chemistry as a more mature development of alchemy. They would have seen today's chemistry as a completely unspiritual parody of their endeavor: perhaps a meticulous and sophisticated unspiritual parody, but a parody none the less.

This provides a glimpse of a thing, or a kind of thing, that can be very difficult to see today. "Alchemy is a crude, superstitious predecessor to real chemistry" or "Chemistry is alchemy that's gotten its act together" is what people often assume when the only categories they have are shaped by our age's massive scientific influence.

Science is a big enough force that young earth Creationists deny Darwinian evolution by assuming that Genesis 1 is answering the same kind of questions that evolution is concerned with, namely "What were the material details of how life came to be?" "What was the mechanism that caused those details to happen?" That is to say, young earth Creationism still assumes that if Genesis 1 is true, that could only mean that it is doing the same job as evolution while providing different answers. It is very difficult for many people to see that Genesis 1-2 might address questions that evolution never raises: neo-Darwinian evolution is silent or

ambivalent about all questions of meaning (if it does not answer "There is no meaning and that is not a question mature scientists should ask."). It is a serious problem if young earth proponents can read Genesis 1 and be insensitive to how the texts speak to questions of "What significance/meaning/purpose/goal does each creation and the whole Creation live and breathe?" This may be a simplification, but we live in enough of a scientific age that many people who oppose the juggernaut (in this case, neo-Darwinian evolution) still resort to disturbingly scientific frameworks and can show a pathological dependence of scientific ways of looking at the world, even when there is no conscious attempt to be scientific. Perhaps evolutionists may accuse young earth Creationists of not being scientific enough, but I would suggest that the deepest problem is that they are *too* scientific: they may not meet the yardstick in non-Creationist biology departments, but they try to play the game of science hard enough that whatever critique you may offer of their success in gaining science's sight, nobody notices how perfectly they gain science's blind spots—even when they are blind spots that make more sense to find in a neo-Darwinist but are extremely strange in a religiously motivated movement.

This is symptomatic of today's *Zeitgeist*, and it affects our understanding of time.

Time is something that I don't think can be unraveled without being able to question the assumed science-like categories and framework that define what is thinkable when we have no pretensions of thinking scientifically, along lines like what I have said of alchemy. I'm not really interested in calling chemists "charcoal blowers": the Pythagoreans would probably censure me in similar vein after finding I ranked such-and-such in a major math competition, did my first master's in applied math, and to their horror studied a mathematics that was *completely* secularized and had absolutely nothing of the "sacred

science "spiritual discipline" character of their geometry left.

I may not want to call scientists "charcoal blowers", but I *do* want to say and explore things that cannot be said unless we appreciate something else. That something else... If you say that alchemy disintegrated to become chemistry, that something else disintegrated in alchemy with its secrets and something else purportedly better than what was in the open. Alchemy has a host of problems that need to be peeled back; they may be different problems than those of our scientific age, and it may make a helpful illustration before the peeling back further and cutting deeper that is my real goal, but it is a problematic illustration.

I once would have said that classical (Newtonian) physics was simply a mathematical formalization of our common sense. My idea of this began when I was taking a class that dealt with modern physics (after covering Einstein's theory of relativity). I grappled with something that many budding physicists grapple with: compared to classical physics, the theory of relativity and modern physics are remarkably counter-intuitive. One wag said, "God said, 'Let there be light!' And there was Newton. The Devil howled, 'Let darkness return!' And there was Einstein [and then modern physics], and the status quo was restored." Modern physics may describe our world's behavior more accurately, but it takes the strangest route to get to its result: not only is light both a particle and a wave, but everything, from a sound wave to you, is both a particle and a wave; nothing is exactly at any one place (we're all spread throughout the whole universe but particularly densely concentrated in some places more than others); it can depend on your frame of reference whether two things happen simultaneously; Newton's mathematically simple, coherent, lovely grid for all of space no longer exists, even if you don't consider space having all sorts of curvatures that aren't *that* hard to describe mathematically but are impossible to directly visualize. (And that was before superstring theory came into

vogue; it seems that whatever doesn't kill physics makes it *stranger*.)

I would make one perhaps subtle, but important, change to what I said earlier, that classical Newtonian physics is a mathematical expression of common sense: I had things backwards and *the Western common sense I grew up with is a non-mathematical paraphrase of classical physics*.

One thing Einstein dismantled was a single absolute grid for space and a single timeline that everything fit on. That was something Newton (and perhaps others—see the chapter "The Remarkable Masculine Birth of Time" in [Science as Salvation](#), Mary Midgley) worked hard to establish. What people are not fond of saying today is that "It's all relative" is something people might like to be backed by Einstein's theory, but *relativity* is no more *relativism* than 'lightning' is 'lightning bug'. In that sense the theory of relativity makes a far smaller difference than you might expect... Einstein if anything fine-tuned Newton's timeline and grid and left behind something practically indistinguishable. But let's look at Newton's timeline and not look at almost equivalent replacements later physics has fine-tuned. All of space fits on a single absolute grid and all of time is to be understood in terms of its place on a timeline. This is physics shaping the rest of its culture. *It's also something many cultures do not share*. I do not mean that the laws of physics only apply where people believe in them; setting aside miracles, a stove works as Newtonian physics says it should whether you worship Newton, defy him and disbelieve him whenever you can, or simply have never thought of physics in connection with your stove. I don't mean that kind of "subjective reality". That's not what I'm saying. But the experience of space as "what fits on a grid", so that a grid you cannot touch is a deeper reality than the things you see and touch every day, and the experience of time as "what fits on a timeline" is something that can be weaker or often nonexistent in other cultures. It's not an

essential to how humans automatically experience the world.

There is a medieval icon of two saints from different centuries meeting; this is not a strange thing to portray in a medieval context because much as space was not "what fills out a grid" but spaces (plural) which were more or less their own worlds, enclosed as our rooms are, time was not defined as "what clocks measure" even if people just began to use clocks.

Quick—what are the time and date? I would expect you to know the year immediately (or maybe misremember because the year has just changed), and quite possibly have a watch that keeps track of seconds.

Quick—what latitude and longitude you are at? If you didn't or don't know the Chicago area and read in a human interest news story that someone took an afternoon stroll from Homewood to Schaumburg, IL, would those two names make the statement seem strange?

What if you continued reading and found out that Homewood is at $41^{\circ}34'46''\text{N}$ and $87^{\circ}39'57''\text{W}$ and Schaumburg is at $42^{\circ}01'39''\text{N}$ and $88^{\circ}05'32''\text{W}$? Setting aside the quite significant fact that most of us don't tell latitude and longitude when we see a place name, what would that say?

If you do the calculations, you see that saying someone walked from Homewood to Schaumburg and back in an afternoon is like a newspaper saying that the President was born in 671. Schaumburg and Homewood are both Chicago suburbs, but in almost opposite directions, and to the best of my knowledge no distance runner could run from Homewood to Schaumburg to Homewood in an afternoon—even in good traffic the drive would chew up more than a little bit of an afternoon.

Do you see the difference between how we approach and

experience our position on the time-grid on the one-hand, and our latitudinal and longitudinal position on the other? Setting aside various questions about calendars, I would suggest that the way most of us neither know nor care what latitude and longitude we're at, can give a glimpse into how a great many people neither know nor cared not only what a watch says but what century they're in. (*Quick*—does your country include the "turn of the century" for degrees latitude or longitude?)

There are other things to say; I want to get into *chronos* or *kairos*, and some of the meaning of "You cannot kill time without injuring eternity." (One facet, besides the wordplay, is that time is an image of not only eternity but the Eternal One.) There are several images of time, or names of time, that I wish to explore; none of them is perfect, but all of them say something. But first let me give the question I am trying to answer.

The Question

Before I say more about time in the sense of giving names to it, I would like to explain the question I am trying to answer, because it is perhaps idiosyncratically my own question, and one that may not be entirely obvious.

There is a book on college admissions essays that listed cliché student essays that almost immediately make an admissions reader's eyes glaze over. Among these was The Travel Experience, which went something like this:

In my trip to _____, I discovered a different way of life that challenged many of my assumptions. It even challenged assumptions I didn't know I had! Yet I discovered that their way of life is also valid and also human.

Note that this boiled down essay is ambiguous, not only

about what region or what country, but for that matter what continent the writer has been to. And thus, however deep and interesting the experience itself may have been, the writeup is cliché and uninteresting.

This, in my opinion, is because the experience is deep in a way that is difficult to convey. If something funny happened yesterday on the way to the store, it is perfectly straightforward to explain what happened, but a deep cross-cultural counter is the sort of thing people grasp at words to convey. It's like the deepest gratitude that doesn't know how to express itself except by repeating the cliché, "Words cannot express my gratitude to you."

I'm from the U.S. and have lived in Malaysia, France, and England (in that order). I was only in Malaysia for a couple of months, but I was baptized there, and I have fond memories of my time there—I understand why a lot of Westerners come to Malaysia and want to spend the rest of their lives there.

One thing I changed there was how quickly I walked. Before then, I walked at a swift clip. But walking that way comes across somewhere between strange and bothersome, and I had to learn to walk slowly—and that was the beginning of my encounter with time in Malaysia. In the cliché above, I learned that some things that were to me not just presuppositions but "just the way things were" were in fact not "just the way things were" but cultural assumptions and a cultural way of experiencing time, which could be experienced very differently.

Some of this is an "ex-pat" experience of time in Malaysia rather than a native Malaysian experience of Malaysian time (there are important differences between the two), but the best concise way I can describe it is that there are people in the U.S. who try and want to escape the "tyranny of the clock," and the tyranny of the clock is frequently criticized in some circles, but in Malaysia there is much less tyranny

of the clock—I was tempted to say the tyranny of the clock didn't exist at all. People walk more slowly because walking is not something you rush through just to get it done, even if it's important that you arrive where you're walking to.

Every place I've lived I've taken something away. The biggest personal change I took from Malaysia had to do with time. That experience gave me something I personally would not have gained from hearing and even agreeing with complaints about the tyranny of the clock. The first domino started to topple in Malaysia, and the chain continued after I returned to the U.S.

What I tried to do on the outside was move more slowly and rebel against the clock, and on the inside to experience, or cultivate, a different time more slowly. (I was trying to be less time-bound, but interacted with time in ways I didn't do before Malaysia.) I still tried (and still try) to meet people on time, but where I had freedom, the clock was as absent as I could make it. And it was essentially an internal experience, in a sort of classically postmodern fashion. I wore a watch, but changed its meaning. Augustine regarded there being something evil about our existence being rationed out to us, God having his whole existence in one "eternal moment"; I equated time with the tyranny of the clock and "what a clock measures", and called timelessness a virtue. If we set aside the inconsistency between trying to "escape" time as not basically good and digging more and more deeply into time, you have something that was growing in me, with nuance, over the years since I've been in Malaysia.

That sets much of the stage for why I began to write this. In one sense, this is an answer to "What can time be besides what the tyranny of the clock says it is?" In another sense it is recognizing that I took something good from Malaysia, but didn't quite hit the nail on the head: I regarded time as basically evil, something to neutralize and minimize even as

I was in it, which I now repent of. That is an incorrect way of trying to articulate something good. I would like to both correct and build upon my earlier living-of-time, beginning with what might be called **the flesh of the Incarnation**.

The Flesh of the Incarnation

One time several friends and I were together, and one of them, who is quite strong but is silver-haired, talked about how he couldn't put a finger on it, but he saw a sadness in the fact that the closest place for him to be buried that would satisfy certain Orthodox concerns was a couple of states over. I said that there were Nobel prizes for literature and economics, but there would never be a Nobel prize for scamming seniors out of their retirement. In that sense the Nobel prize is not just an honor for the negligible handful of physicists who receive that accolade, but every physicist. Perhaps there are a great many more honorable professions than there are Nobel prizes, but the Nobel prize doesn't vacuously say that physics is a good thing but specifically recognizes one physicist at a time, and by implication honors those who share in the same labor.

I said that "God does not make any generic people," and I clarified that in the Incarnation, Jesus was not a sort of "generic person" ("I went to the general store and they wouldn't sell me anything specific!") who sort of generically blessed the earth and in some generic fashion sympathized with those of us specific people who live in time. God has never made a specific person, and when Christ became incarnate, he became a specific man in a specific place at a specific time. As much as we are all specific people who live in a specific place at a specific time, he became a specific person who lived in a specific place at a specific time, and by doing that he honored every place and time.

"The flesh of the Incarnation," in Orthodox understanding,

is not and cannot be limited to what an atheist trying to be rigorous would consider the body of Christ. The Incarnation is a shock wave ever reaching out in different directions. One direction is that the Son of God became a Man that men might become the Sons of God. Another direction is that Christ the Savior of man or the Church can never be separated from Christ the Savior of the whole cosmos, and for people who are concerned with ecology, Christ's shockwave cannot but say something profound from the Creation which we must care for. Sacraments and icons are part of this Transfigured matter, and the Transfiguration is a glimpse of what God is working not only for his human faithful but the entire universe he created to share in his glory.

To me at least, "the flesh of the Incarnation" is why, while the Catholic Church is willing to experiment with different philosophies and culture, because they are not part of the theological core, the Orthodox Church has preserved a far greater core of the patristic philosophy and culture. It is as if the Catholic Church, getting too much Augustine (or even worse, DesCartes), said "Spirit and matter are different things; so are theology and philosophy. We must keep the spirit of theology, but matter is separate and can be replaced." An Orthodox reply might be "Spirit and matter are connected at the most intimate level; so are theology, philosophy and culture. We must keep the spirit of theology without separating it from the philosophy and culture which have been the flesh of the Incarnation from the Church's origin."

If Jesus was not a "generic person", and I am not supposed to be a "generic person", then the place in time he made for you is to be transfigured as the flesh of the Incarnation. What I mean by "the flesh of the Incarnation" is that Christ became Incarnate at a specific time and place, and by so doing he honored not only your flesh and mine—he is as much a son of Adam as you and me—but every time and

place.

There is a major Orthodox exegesis which looks at the Gospels and says that when Pilate presented Christ to the crowd and said, "*Idou ton anthropon.*" ("Behold the man", Jn 19.5), he was prophesying like Caiphias and (perhaps without knowing it) completing the Genesis story; when Christ on the cross said, "It is finished," he announced that the work of Creation which was begun in Genesis had come to its conclusion—not, perhaps, the end of history, but the beginning of the fulness which Creation always needed but is only found at the cross. There are theologians today which answer the question "When did God create the earth?" by giving the date of the crucifixion: not that nothing existed before then, but then it was made complete. 25 March 28 AD is, in commercial terms, not the beginning of when prototypes began to be assembled and plans began to be made towards a product release, but the date that the finished product is released and thereafter available to the public. The Cross is the axis of the world, so that the Incarnation is not simply the central event in history but the defining event, not only in the time and place that we falsely consider remote which Jesus lived in, but your time and mine.

A Paradox: Historical Accuracy and Timelessness

I read a cultural commentary on the Bible cover to cover (IVP Bible Background Commentary: [Old Testament](#), [New Testament](#)), and in one sense I'm glad I read it, but in another sense, I think I would have been better off reading the Bible cover to cover another time. Or, for that matter, creating computer software or pursuing some other interest outside of the Bible and theology.

Years earlier, I said I wished I could read a cultural

commentary on the Bible, but reading it drove home a point in a Dorothy Sayers essay. The essay suggested that "period awareness", our sharp sense of "That was then and this is now" that puts such a sharp break between the past and the present, is a product of the Enlightenment and something a great many periods do not share. When one reads the [Canterbury Tales](#) and asks what they thought about cultures, the answer is that though the stories begin in classical times there is no modern sense of "These people lived in another time so I need to try to be historically accurate and keep track of lots of historical context to take them seriously."

What I have realized, partly in writing my first theology thesis in Biblical studies, was that a lot of cultural commentary is spiritually inert when it is not used as a tool to manipulate or neutralize the Bible for contradicting what's in vogue today. Even when the sizeable "lobbyist" misuse of cultural context is ignored, there is a big difference between scholarly cultural and historical inquiry and a cultural sermon illustration—and it's *not* that less scholarly pastors do a half-baked job of something "real" scholars do much better. Cultural sermon comments are selected from a vast body of knowledge specifically because they illuminate the text and therefore at least can enhance how the text speaks to us. "Serious", "real" scholarship tends to bury the text's meaning under a lot of details and result in the same kind of loss of meaning that would happen if someone asked what a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel meant and the answer was to explain try to explain everything about how the novel came to be, including how the author's food was prepared, how the editing process was managed, and perhaps a few notes on how a Pulitzer Prize novel, after the award is received, is marketed differently from novels that haven't received that award.

I would like to suggest that in this piece my opening historical illustration did not detail everything a "historical-

critical" study would get bogged down in, and showed independence from the historical-critical version of what scholarly accuracy means *precisely as it challenged a popular historical misunderstanding of alchemy*.

How does this fit together? There are two things. First of all, I disagree with most scholarship's center of gravity.

"Historical-critical" scholarship, in a bad imitation of materially focused science, has a material center of gravity, and almost the whole of its rigor can be described in saying, "Look down as carefully as you can!" There is a painting which shows two philosophers, Plato and Aristotle. You can tell them apart because Plato is pointing up with one finger, and Aristotle is pointing down to material particulars with one finger. The problem with "historical-critical" scholarship in theology—and not only "historical-critical" scholarship—is that it asks Aristotle to do Plato's work. It asks the details of history to provide theological meaning. (Which is a bit like using a microscope to view a landscape, only worse and having more kinds of problems.)

Dorothy Sayers points out that up until the Enlightenment, people producing Shakespeare plays made no more effort to have the actors dress like people did in Shakespeare's days than Shakespeare himself felt the need to dress ancient characters in authentic Roman styles of clothing.

Shakespeare's plays were produced because they had something powerful that spoke to people, and people didn't have this rigid historical dictate that said "If you will produce Shakespeare authentically, that means you go out of your way to acquire costumes nobody wears today." In the Globe Theatre, people were dressed up like... well, *people*, whether that meant Rome or the "here and now". And now theatre companies will be provocative or "creative" and change the setting in a Shakespeare play so that things look like some romanticization of the Wild West, or classy 20's gangsters, or (*yawn*) contemporary to us, but if you exclude people who are being a bit provocative, the

normal way of putting on Shakespeare is not by having people dress the way people normally dress, but by doing research and putting people in exotic clothing that clearly labels the characters as being From Another Time.

Shakespeare's plays are produced today because they speak today, in other words because they are timeless. Being timeless doesn't mean literally being unrelated to any specific historical context ("I went to the general store and they wouldn't sell me anything specific!"). It means that something appears in a particular context and in that context expresses human-ness richly and fully enough that that human fingerprint speaks beyond the initial context. It means that there is a human bond that can bridge the gap of time as beautifully as two people having a friendship that simultaneously embraces and reaches beyond the differences of culture that exist between their nations. And it reflects a center of gravity that the important thing about Shakespeare is not that his English was hard to understand even hundreds of years ago, nor that people dressed a certain way that is different from any country today, but a human, spiritual center of gravity that not only speaks powerfully in the West centuries later but speaks powerfully outside the West. Shakespeare's center of gravity is not in this or that detail, but in a human pulse.

Wind and Spirit

Let me look at something that appears to be unrelated.

The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it	The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it	The Spirit Spirits where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; so it
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goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit.
 goes; so it is every one who is born of the Spirit.
 is with every one who is born of the Spirit.
 the Wind.

I can count on my fingers the number of points where I would gripe about the best English translations (if a euphemistically mistranslated Song of Songs only counts as one gripe). You don't need to study ancient languages to know the Bible well. But there are occasional points where a language issue cuts something out of the text.

One particularly Orthodox gripe about Western translations is that they use the word "Christ" for the Son of God and "anointed" to have a range of meanings and include kings, priests, objects that were considered sacred, and the whole religious community (this latter in both Old and New Testament). This is not because of what is in the original language. People may hear—I heard—that Messiah or Christ means, "Anointed One", but the English translations I know introduce a sharper distinction than the text supports, and really drains the realization of verses that show another side of the New Testament's language of us being called to be sons or children of God. I remember the shock I had when I was reading the (Latin) Vulgate and David, refusing to call Saul, called him "christum Domini" ("the Lord's christ," but the Latin, like Hebrew and Greek before it, did not distinguish i.e. "Christum" from "christum".) I John 2:20 in the RSV says, "But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all know." That obscures a dimension to the text that legitimately could be replaced by a different part of speech and clarified, "But you have been made christs by the Holy One, and you all know." (If you don't like changing a part of speech, you could look at texts like Sometimes you get C.S. Lewis saying "Every Christian is to become a little christ. The whole purpose of being a Christian is simply nothing else. The Son of God became a man that men might become the Sons of God." But something of the knowledge of who we are to be in Christ is crippled when translations

split up XPICTOC or its Hebrew equivalent because they are afraid to let people see that not only is Christ the Son of God and the Christian son of God, but one who is in the Christ is a christ.

That is the translators' fault. In the text cited above (Jn 3.8), from Jesus' discussion of flesh and Spirit/spirit, the same word in Greek (ΠΙΝΕΥΜΑ) carries the meaning of "Spirit", "spirit", and "wind" in the broader passage. I was tempted to write that ΠΙΝΕΥΜΑ carries that range of meanings, but that's a little more deceptive than I'm comfortable with. It would be more accurate to say that neither "spirit" and "wind", nor "Spirit and spirit", represented sharply distinguished categories. In a way Jesus is punning but in a way he is making an observation about spirit/wind that does not rest on the distinction.

Let me quote the RSV for the longer passage (Jn 3.1-12):

Now there was a man of the Pharisees, named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him."

Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"

Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the

Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.' The wind blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can this be?"

Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this? Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen; but you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"

This is a rather big passage to try to unravel, but let me point out one thing. Jesus is dealing with a spiritual leader, and that leader's question, "How can a man be born when he is old?" is probably not just a failure to recognize that Jesus was speaking figuratively (especially if "figuratively" means what it means today, i.e. "a consolation prize for something that is dismissed as not true, at least not literally"). Besides saying that Nicodemus might not be stupid, I might suggest that his failure to understand underscores that he was being told something that's difficult to understand.

I'm almost tempted to write ΠΝΕΥΜΑ instead of spirit or Spirit because that forces a distinction that isn't there at all in the Greek New Testament and often may not belong in good theology. With that noted, I'm going to write Spirit with the understanding that it is often not meant to be read as separated from spirit and often not distinguished.

A group of people misunderstood this and other Spirit/flesh texts to mean that we should live in the part of us that is spirit and the part of it that was flesh, and they made a

number of theological errors, and unfortunately some Christians have since treated the Spirit/flesh texts as a "problem" that needs to be "handled" (and, one might infer, not quite something that was put in the Bible because it would help us). This reaction makes it harder to understand some passages that say something valuable.

We are to become all Spirit. This does not, as those Gnostics believed, mean that our bodies are evil, or that any part of God's Creation is created evil. To become Spirit is to begin to live the life of Heaven here on earth. That doesn't mean that what is not-God in our lives now is eliminated; it means that our whole lives are to become divine. It means that the whole cosmos has been in need of salvation, and Christ comes as Savior to his whole Creation and his whole Creation is to be drawn into him and made divine. If you buy a gift for a friend, let us say a watch, and delight in giving it, that watch is no longer merely a possession you can hoard, not just something a machine spat out. It is part of your friendship with that friend and it has been drawn from the store aisle into that friendship. To use an ancient metaphor, it has been drawn into the body under the head of friendship. (And now it means something a factory could never put into it.) If you have begun to believe that things don't boil down to a materialist's bottom line, the watch has become more real. In the same sense, not just our "souls" or "spirits" misunderstood as opposite to our bodies, but all of us and all of our lives are to become Spirit, or in the more usual Orthodox terminology become deified or divinized.

To say that the here and now that God has placed us in is "the flesh of the Incarnation" is not intended as some kind of opposite to Spirit. That flesh *is* spiritual; it is the whole Creation as it becomes Spirit and as it has become Spirit.

That much is generic; it is legitimate to say about time, because it is legitimate to say about almost anything. I would now like to turn and say something more specific

about time.

I don't like to put things in terms of "synchronicity." For those of you not familiar with synchronicity, it's an idea that there is more to causality and time than isolated particles moving along a linear timeline, which is well and good, but this is a body missing its head, the Spirit. It's kind of a strange way of being spiritual while not being fully connected to Spirit.

"That which is born of flesh is flesh; that which is born of Spirit is Spirit. The Spirit Spirits where it wills, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes; *so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit.*"

To live in the Spirit, and to become Spirit, is for one and the same reason the proper footing for synchronicity, synchronicity done right, and moving beyond "subjective time." Let me talk about subjective time before talking more about synchronicity.

Subjective time is what some people have observed when people have realized that a watch is a poor indicator of how we experience time. Time flies; it can drag; but whatever watches can do, they don't tell how fast it seems like time is moving. In other words, subjective time at least is not what a watch measures. Now this is good as an answer to the question "What can we call time besides 'what a watch measures'?" but doesn't go far enough. Subjective time is the subjective time of a "me, myself, and I". It is the time of an atom, that cannot be divided further. And that limits it.

Time in the Spirit is an orchestrated, community dance. Not that the specific person is annihilated, but the specific person is transfigured. And that means that what is merely part of the private inner world of a "me, myself, and I" is in fact something vibrant in a community. Liturgical time, which I will talk about later, is one instrument of this

sharing. But it is not the only one. God is the Great Choreographer, and when his Spirit orders the dance, it is everything in synchronicity and everything in subjective time and more. What was eerie, a strange occult thing people try to mine out in Jungian synchronicity becomes a pile of gold out in the open. If Jungian synchronicity is a series of opportunities to shrewdly steal food, the Dance is an invitation to join the banquet table.

Dance, then, wherever you may be, for I am the Lord of the Dance, said he. (Old Shaker hymn)

Immortalists and Transhumanists

I was reading a novel by one of my favorite authors in which some troubled characters constantly waxed eloquent about a movement, the "Immortalists", which struck me as rather far-fetched, too preposterous a motivation for literature... until I found a group very much like them, the Transhumanist movement, on the web.

The idea of Transhumanism is that we have lived in biological bodies so far, but we are on the cusp of making progress, and "progress" is improving on the human race so that we humans (or transitional humans —"Transhumanism" abbreviates "transitional-human-ism", and transhumanists consider themselves transhuman) can be replaced by some "posthuman" (this is supposed to be a good thing) creatures of our own devising which are always as high as if they were on crack (or higher), can run and jump like superheroes, and in general represent the fulfillment of a certain class of fantasies. (It's like disturbing science fiction, only they're dead serious about replacing the human race with something they consider better.) It's the only time reading philosophy on the web has moved me to nausea, and that broad nexus of spiritual forces is something I tried to lampoon in [Yonder](#).

Setting that obscure movement aside, it seems a lot like the progress of technology has been to achieve watered-down transhumanist goals while we live in the bodies God gave us. I read an interesting article describing how before electric lights even though there were candles most of society seemed to shut down at sundown. Now people tend to kind of sleep when it's dark and kind of sleep when it's light, but we have made ourselves independent of something most humans in history (let alone before history) were tightly attuned to. I can also buy pills to take to subdue pain, or slightly misuse my body and not feel as much of the natural pain. If I don't care either about my health or breaking laws that are there for our good, there are illicit pills that could make me colossally strong: I'm moderately strong now but I could become stronger than most professional athletes. As a member of my society I have space-conquering tools—a telling name—which mean that I can move around the world and I can email and talk with people without knowing and perhaps without caring if they are next door or a thousand miles away. I can also take other pills when I get much older and defeat the normal limits age puts on lust. There are a lot of limits humans have lived with time out of mind, but we've discovered how to push them aside.

I heard of a dialogue where one person said, "I don't have enough time," and received the answer, "*You have all the time there is.*" In many cultures people experience time more as something that surrounds them but they're not terribly aware of, like the air they breathe, than a sort of scant commodity one cannot have enough of. And that is a clue to something.

However much we've figured out mini-transhumanist ways to push back limitations, the limitation of "all the time there is" is one we can't eliminate. We can fudge a bit with coffee or buy into some time management system, but there is a specific significance to time in our culture that wouldn't be

there in other cultures where people rise at sunrise and go to sleep at sunset. Compared to how much we can neutralize other limitations, the limitation of "all the time there is" is a limitation that resists most neutralization.

That sounds terrible, but I would draw your attention to what Transhumanism is really after. I heard one professor refer to a centuries-old Utopian vision of turning the sea into lemonade (among other things) as "*une Utopie des enfants gaspillés*" ("a Utopia of spoiled children"). The Transhumanist vision, which has already happened in miniature, is the ability to pursue "bigger better faster more" of what spoiled children want. What it is not is a way to grow into what a mature adult wants.

I'm not saying we should get rid of medicine, or anything like that. Medical knowledge has done some impressive things. But I would pointedly suggest that the kind of things technological advances give us give us much more what spoiled children want than what a mature adult would recognize as an aid to maturity. There are exceptions, and I would not argue any sort of straight Luddite position: I try to moderate my use of technology like I try to moderate a lot of other good things, but I am very glad for the opportunity to live in an age where webpages are possible, and to have gotten in at a good time. But the "all the time there is" limitation is in fact the kind of boundary that helps mature adults grow more mature, and if we are willing to take it there is an occasion for maturity because we can't take a pill to have all the time we want.

From the Fifth Gospel to Liturgical Time

The Gospel According to Thomas isn't the Fifth Gospel. (At least, in ancient times when Christians said "the Fifth Gospel" they didn't mean the Gospel According to Thomas.

No comments from the peanut gallery about the Gospel According to Thomas being the Fifth Bird Cage Liner.)

If a couple of people meet, become acquainted, become friends, start dating, become engaged, and get married, when does the marriage begin? In one sense, the wedding is a formal threshold: before then they aren't married, afterwards they are. But in another sense the engagement becomes part of the marriage, as does the courtship, the friendship, the acquaintance, even the first meeting and possibly things in their lives that they would say prepared them for the meeting. The marriage moves forward from the wedding date but it also reaches backwards and creates something in the past. What may have been an improbable or forgettable first meeting is drawn into the marriage; the same thing is going on as with the watch which becomes not simply matter but part of a friendship.

John Behr has provocatively suggested that the worst thing that has happened to Christianity in the past 2000 years has been the canonization of the New Testament so it is placed as Scripture alongside the Old Testament, and becomes the second and final volume in a series. What he means by that may not be obvious.

The relationship between the Old and New Testament is misunderstood somewhat if the New Testament is simply the final chapter of the Old Testament. It would be better, if still imperfect, to say that the New Testament is Cliff's Notes on the Old Testament, or the Old Testament was a rich computer game and the New Testament was the strategy guide that we need to unlock it's secrets. It is no accident that the first people we know of to put the New Testament alongside the Old Testament, and make commentaries on both Testaments, were Gnostics who tried to unlock the New Testament when orthodox Christians let the New Testament unlock the Old.

Quick—which Christ-centered Gospel did Handel use in the

Messiah to tell of the Messiah or Christ? The answer is the Fifth Gospel: Isaiah. The passages cited in the Messiah are not a few prophetic exceptions to a non-Christ-related Old Testament; they are part of the Old Testament unlocked, and that same reading is how the earliest Christians read the Old Testament Scriptures.

Now it was Mary Mag'dalene and Jo-an'na and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told this to the apostles; but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

That very day two of them were going to a village named Emma'us, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.

While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them.

But their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

And he said to them, "What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?" And they stood still, looking sad.

Then one of them, named Cle'opas, answered him, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?"

And he said to them, "What things?" And they said to him, "Concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be condemned to

death, and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since this happened. Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; and they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb, and found it just as the women had said; but him they did not see."

And he said to them, "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?"

And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself. So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He appeared to be going further, but they constrained him, saying, "Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent." So he went in to stay with them.

When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight.

They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?"

There's a lot going on here; I'm not going to address why Mary Magdalene was known as the Apostle to the Apostles, but I would suggest that instead of saying today what a feminist would be tempted to say, that the men were sexist and wouldn't believe a woman when she bore the glad tidings, there was a veil over their minds, much like Paul describes in II Cor 3. If a woman's witness did not suffice, Jesus standing with them in person and talking with them still had no effect until the very end. And there is something going on here with a number of resonances in our lives. They couldn't see Christ in the Scriptures (which were then the Old Testament, because the Gospels and Epistles had never been written), and they couldn't see Christ appearing before them, even literally. And that is not because they are imperceptive and we are perceptive. The story is a crystallization of how we often meet Christ.

What is the point of all this? The most immediate reason is not to say that the Bible is 80% documents produced by Judaism before Christianity came around and 20% Christian documents, but transformed, transmuted if you will, into 100% Christian documents. When the book of Psalms opens with, "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the council of the wicked, nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in the seat of cynics," that refers first and foremost to Christ. I myself have not gotten very far in this way of reading the Scriptures, but I hope to, and I believe it will pay rich dividends.

And there is something going on here that is going on in when a marriage reaches backwards, or a watch becomes part of a friendship. It is connected with what is called "recapitulation", which I think is an unfortunate technical theological term because the metaphor comes across as in "Ok, let me try and recap what we've said so far," which is a wishy-washy metaphor for something deep. Orthodox talk about deification, and for us to be deified is a specific example of recapitulation in Christ. Recapitulation means

"re-heading", and while in a sense very consistent with how recapitulation works, I've somewhat indistinguishably talked about how we can be Recapitulated or Re-headed in Christ, becoming body to his head and connected in the most intimate way, thereby becoming Christ (i.e. Recapitulation with a big 'R'), and how something can become part of the body of something that can itself be recapitulated in Christ (recapitulation with only a little 'R'). Perhaps that sentence should be dragged out into the street and shot, but when I talked about the gift of a watch becoming part of a friendship, the head of its reheading is something created, but both the watch and the friendship can be Recapitulated in Christ with the re-heading of the watch to be part of the friendship is itself part of what is Recapitulated in Christ, i.e. which is not merely brought under a head but connected to Christ as its head.

Let's move on to clearer language and a clearer example—one that has to do with our time. The head of the whole body of time we live is our time in worship, liturgical time. This both that there is a liturgical rhythm of day, week, and year, with different practices that help us connect with the different liturgical rhythms (by the way, the first major piece of advice my spiritual father gave me was to take 5-10 years to step into the liturgical rhythm), but that's not all. It means that our time in worship, which is not just time in a funnily decorated room with our particular club, sets the pace for life. It means that what is crystallized and visible in worship is perhaps hidden but if anything more powerfully manifest in a whole life of worship. It means that not just going to Church but working and playing are themselves worship, and they fulfill worship. It means, and I write this on the Sunday of the Last Judgment, that our worship is hollow and empty when we sing hymns to God on Sunday and then turn away in icy silence when someone asks our help—for it is not that someone we have icily turned away from, but Christ (see Matt 25:31-46). In the discourse at the

Last Supper, Christ did not say that all would "know you are my disciples by this, that you have the most beautiful services," but that all would "know you are my disciples by this, that you love one another." (Jn 13.35) That is something that happens *outside* of Church first and foremost. Liturgical time is the basis for time in our lives.

Liturgical time is (or at least should be) the head of time in a life of worship (if "head" is used in the sense of "recapitulation" or "re-heading"), but it is not its own head. The head of time in worship is eternity in Heaven, and that means that just as life is the concrete manifestation of worship, in time but in other matters as well, but liturgical time is not people gathered in a room for an interval but people transported to Heaven in what is not exactly a time machine, or not *merely* a time machine, but an "eternity machine". The head of eternity in Heaven is the Eternal One whose glory shines through Heaven on earth.

What does this concretely mean for our experience of time? It means much the same as whether the material world was created good by God or evil by someone lesser. Pains and physical pleasures, to give a superficial example, will be there whether we believe the material world is good or evil. But it makes a difference whether you believe the sweetness of honey is a touch of love from God or a hatefully baited barb from Satan. Now part of really coming alive is being more than pleasure and pain and letting go of pleasures that they may be recapitulated or re-headed and drawn into what is Spirit. But even then, the Christian ascetic who lets go of a good is very different from a Gnostic ascetic who hatefully rejects it as evil. Pleasures and even pains, and joys and sorrows, are fuller depending on their basis.

Augustine has been accused of inadequate conversion—maybe he became Christian, but he continued being too much of a Manichee. I am sympathetic to that view, and it makes good sense of Augustine's sense that there is

something violent to us about being in time, with our being stingily rationed out to us, infinitesimal bit by bit (some have said the present "barely exists" because it is an instantaneous boundary where the future rushes into the past without stopping to rest), while God has its being all at once. I was sympathetic to that view until not long ago; I thought of time as an evil thing we endure to get to the good of eternity—which is the wrong way of putting it.

Time is a moving image of eternity and is recapitulated in Christ. We miss something fundamental if we simply say that it is less than eternity; it participates in the glory.

Furthermore, there is a case to be made that we misunderstand eternity if it is "frozen time" to us, if it is an instant in time which is prolonged, or even worse, is deprived of a moving timeline. Whatever eternity is, *that can't be it*. That is something fundamentally less than the time in which we grow and learn and breathe. Eternal life, which begins in this world, is God's own life, greater than created being but something that projects its glory into time. I once asked a friend if the difference between Maximus Confessor and Plato on Ideas was that for Plato there was one Idea that covered a bunch of material shadows (what we would think of as "real", but the Ideas were more real), and he waved that aside without really contradicting me. He said that the Ideas, or ΛΟΓΟΙ (*logoi*), were static in Plato but dynamic in Maximus Confessor.

Logoi are ideas loved in the heart of God from all eternity, and you and I only exist because we each have a *logos* in the heart of God which is what we are trying to become. And I don't know how to reconcile what I know of dynamism with being outside of time, but eternity is not the deprivation of time, but something more time-like than time itself. Time becomes eternal when it is recapitulated in Christ.

Kairos and Chronos

Bishop K.T. Ware began one lecture/tape by saying that at the beginning of the Divine Liturgy, there is a line that is very easy to overlook: the deacon tells the bishop or his deputy the priest, "It's time to get started." Except that he doesn't say, "It's time to get started," but "It is time for the Lord to act."

He pointed out both that the liturgy is the Lord's work, even if both priest and faithful must participate for it to be valid (he said that the pop etymology of liturgy as "lit-urgy", "the people's work", may be bad etymology but it's good theology). But another point tightly tied to it is the exact Greek word that is translated "time."

There are two words that are both translated time, but their meanings are very different. Translating them both as time is like translating both genuine concern and hypocritical flattery as "politeness" because you are translating into a language that doesn't show the distinction. Perhaps the translators are not to be blamed, but there is something important going on in the original text that is flattened out in English. And when the deacon says "It's time to get started," it does *not* mean "My watch says 9:00 and that's when people expect us to start," but "This is the decisive moment." In the Gospels, when Jesus' own brothers and sisters failed to grasp who he was just as completely as the disciples on the road to Emmaus, he tells them, "My kairos has not yet come, but your kairos is always here." (Jn 7.6).

Orthodox do not have any kind of monopoly on this distinction, but we do have a distinction between what is called "chronos" and what is called "kairos." Chronos is ordinary if we take a harsh meaning to the word, instead of "everything is as it should be". Chronos at its worst is watching the clock while drudgery goes on and on. If chronos is meaningless time, kairos is meaningful time,

dancing the Great Dance at a decisive moment. It is putting the case too strongly to say that the West is all about chronos and Eastern Christianity is all about kairos, but I do not believe it is putting the case too strongly to say that East and West place chronos and kairos differently, and kairos is less the air people breathe in the West than it should be.

I don't think that chronos needs as much explanation in the West; chronos is what a clock measures; the highbrow word for a stopwatch is "chronometer" and not "kairometer". The distinction between kairos and chronos is somewhat like the distinction between I-Thou and I-It relationship. But let me give "ingredients" to kairos, as if it were something cooked up in a recipe.

- Chronos.
- Eternity.
- Appointed time.
- Rhythmic circular time with interlocking wheels.
- Linear unfolding time.
- Moments when you are absorbed in what you are doing.
- Decisive moments when something is possible that was impossible a moment before and will be impossible a moment later.
- Dancing the serendipitous Great Dance.
- Total presence.

But kairos is not something cooked up in a recipe; chronos may be achievable that way, but kairos is a graced gift of God.

We Might All Be Alcoholics

A recovering alcoholic will tell you that alcoholism is Hell on earth. He would say that it is the worst suffering on earth, or that it is the kind of thing you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy.

And the point that healing and restoration begins is exquisitely painful. An alcoholic has a massive screen of denial that defeats reasoning. The only semi-effective way to defeat that denial is by a massive dose of even more painful reality that can break down that screen, some of the time. (An intervention.)

If alcoholism is Hell, why don't alcoholics step out of it? Some people in much less pain find out what they need to do to stop the pain and leave. They take off a pair of shoes that is too tight, or ask for an ambulance to treat their broken arm (and I believe someone who's been through both experiences would say that alcoholism is a much deeper kind of pain than a broken arm).

Surely alcoholics must have a sense that something is wrong—and that's what they're trying to evade. That's what half an alcoholic's energy goes into evading, because stopping and saying "I'm an alcoholic." is the greatest terror an alcoholic can jump into. It may be a greater fear than the fear of death—or it *is* the fear of the death, a step into where nothing is guaranteed.

And that is where to become Orthodox might as well be recognizing you are an alcoholic. Not, perhaps, that every Orthodox has a problem with alcohol, but we all have a problem, a spiritual disease called sin that is not a crime, but is infinitely worse than mere criminality. And the experience an alcoholic says saying, "My name's Ashley, and I'm an alcoholic," for the first time, is foundational to Orthodox religion. "Here is trustworthy saying that deserves acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save

sinner, of whom I am the first."

There is a book, I have been told, among alcoholics called Not-God, because part of dealing with the cancer of alcoholism, as difficult as recognizing a terrible problem with alcohol, is recognizing that you have been trying to be God and not only are you not God, but your playing God has caused almost untold troubles.

Repentance is the most terrifying experience an Orthodox or an alcoholic can experience because when God really confronts you, he doesn't just say "Give me a little bit." He says, "Give me everything," and demands an unconditional surrender that you write a blank check. This is as terrifying as the fear of death—or perhaps it is the fear of death, because everything we are holding dear, and especially the one thing we hold most dear, must be absolutely surrendered to—the Great Physician never tells us what, because then it would not be the surrender we need. We are simply told, "Write a blank check to me. Now."

How does this square with becoming a little Christ?

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he

humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

The two paragraphs, as I have broken up Phil 2:1-11 (RSV), are complementary. What the last paragraph says is that the equal Son of God emptied himself and kept on emptying himself further and suffering further until there is nothing left to give. And this is not a sinner, a mere creature, but the spotless and sinless Son of God showing what it means to be divine. It is not in Heaven that Christ shows the full force of divinity, but by emptying himself, willingly, to death on a cross and a descent into the realm of the dead. That is the moment when death itself began to work backwards—and humbling and emptying ourselves before God is the sigil of being exalted and filled with God's goodness. But the other side of the coin is that if we think we can become divine, or even be human, while not being emptied, we are asking to be above Christ and expecting to have something that is utterly incoherent.

When we recognize that we are not God, then we become christs. When we empty ourselves, and let go of that one thing we are most afraid of giving to God, then we discover, along with the recovering alcoholic, that what we were most afraid to give up was a piece of Hell. We discover, with the alcoholic, that what we were fighting God about, and offering him consolation prizes in place of, was not something God needed, but something we needed to be freed from.

This emptying, this blank check and unconditional surrender, is what makes divinization possible. I was

tempted in writing this to say that it is the ultimate kairos, but that's exaggerating: the ultimate kairos is the Eucharist, but if we refuse this kairos, we befoul what we could experience in the Eucharist. If we are talking about a decisive moment that is not our saying "I want to make myself holier" so much as us hearing God say "You need to listen to me NOW," then however painful it may be it is a step into kairos and a step further into kairos. And only after the surrender do we discover that what we were fighting against was an opportunity to step one step further into Heaven.

Repentance is appointed time. Repentance is *the* decisive moment, one we enter into again. Repentance is simultaneously death and transfiguration, the death that is transfiguration and the transfiguration that recapitulates death. Repentance is eternity breaking into time. Repentance is one eternal moment, and the moment we cycle back to, and the steps of climbing into Heaven. Repentance is being pulled out of the mud and painfully scrubbed clean. Repentance is fighting your way into the Great Peace. Repentance is the moment when we step out of unreality and unreal time into reality and the deepest time. Repentance is not the only moment in kairos, but it is among the most powerful and the most deeply transforming, decisive moments that appointed kairos has to offer.

Miscellanea

I do not have time to write, and perhaps you do not have time to read, separate sections about some things I will briefly summarize:

- Life neither begins at 18 nor ends at 30. Every age is to be part of a kaleidoscope. Contrary to popular opinion in America, not only is it not a sin to grow

old, but each age has its own beauty, like the seasons in turn and like the colors in a kaleidoscope. And that is why I do not guiltily talk about having "hit 30" any more than I would guiltily talk about having "hit 18" or "hit 5", because in the end feeling guilty about approaching a ripe age is as strange as feeling guilty about being born: not that there is anything wrong with being a child in the womb, but the purpose of that special age is not to remain perennially in the womb but to grow in maturity and stature until our life is complete and God, who has numbered the hairs on our heads and without whom not even a sparrow can die, come to the thing we fear in age and discover that this, "death", is not the end of a Christian's life but the portal to the fulness of Heaven where we will see in full what we can now merely glimpse.

- When we reach Heaven or Hell, they will have reached back so completely that our whole lives will have been the beginning of Heaven or the beginning of Hell.
- People make a dichotomy between linear and cyclical time. The two can be combined in spiral (or maybe helical) time, and the movement of time forwards in growth combined with the liturgical cycles makes a rhythmic but never-repeating helix or spiral. (If that is embedded in what Maximus Confessor said about linear, circular, and spiral motion.)
- One step away from saying that time is a line is saying that time is a pole on which a living vine grows, making a richer kind of connection than a materialist would see. That is a little bit of why we are contemporaries of Christ.

The Horn of Joy

...Sandy called after [Meg], "And also in 1865 Rudyard Kipling was born, and Verlaine wrote *Poèmes saturniens*, and John Stuart Mill wrote *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, and Purdue, Cornell, and the universities of Maine were founded."

She waved back at him, then paused as he continued, "And Matthew Maddox's first novel, *Once More United*, was published."

She turned back, asking in a carefully controlled voice, "Maddox? I don't think I've ever heard of that author."

"You stuck to math in school."

"Yeah, Calvin always helped me with my English papers. Did this Matthew Maddox write anything else?"

Sandy flipped through the pages. "Let's see. Nothing in 1866, 1867. 1868, here we are, *The Horn of Joy*."

"Oh, that," Dennys said. "I remember him now. I had to take a lit course my sophomore year in college, and I took nineteenth-century American literature. We read that, Matthew Maddox's second and last book, *The Horn of Joy*. My prof said if he hadn't died he'd have been right up there with Hawthorne and James. It was a strange book, passionately anti-war, I remember, and it went way back into the past, and there was

some weird theory of the future influencing the past—not my kind of book at all." (Madeleine l'Engle, [A Swiftly Tilting Planet](#).)

Madeleine l'Engle's [A Swiftly Tilting Planet](#) immediately follows my favorite children's book, [A Wind in the Door](#). I wished I could visit Patagonia, and tried to find a book she mentions in [Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art](#) as seminal to the Welsh legend in [A Swiftly Tilting Planet](#). I also looked for *The Horn of Joy* and was disappointed, if not necessarily surprised, to learn that this was the one fictional addition to an otherwise historical list.

It would be not only strange but presumptuous to suggest that this piece I am writing is what she was referring to. Perhaps it is presumptuous to use that title, although it may seem less presumptuous if one understands how special and even formative Madeleine l'Engle's work has been to me. But what does not seem strange to suggest is that this work may affect the meaning of [A Swiftly Tilting Planet](#). That would only be determined by other people's judgment and is not my call to make, but I don't think Madeleine l'Engle would be offended if someone said that this enhanced the value of her work, or added another layer to what she said about time. Her own words not only in that work but in [Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art](#) about how a work can be enhanced by future insights would suggest the possible. It is quite possible that my work is not good enough or not relevant enough to serve as such a key, but the suggestion is not that strange to make.

But let us move on to one closing remark.

Extraordinary and Utterly Ordinary

The Enlightenment has left us with a lot of wreckage, and

one of this is great difficulty seeing what causality could be besides "one domino mechanically toppling others."

Aristotle listed four causes: the material cause, formal cause, efficient cause, and final cause. The material and formal cause are interesting to me as something the Enlightenment would not think to include in causality: Aristotle's [Physics](#) portrays the bronze in a statue as a material cause to the statue. If we listen to the hint, this could suggest that causality for Aristotle is something besides just dominoes falling. He does deal with mechanical, domino-like causation when he describes the efficient cause, but I remember being taken with the "final cause", the goal something is progressing towards, because I thought it was domino causation that had the effect before the cause.

The best response I can give now to what I believed then was, "Um, kind of." Aristotle's four causes address a broader and more human kind of causation that looks at questions like why something happened and not just how it was produced. It is in fact an utterly ordinary way of looking at things. It's not the *only* serious way of describing causality (my favorite physics teacher said in class, "If Aristotle said it, it was wrong," and I think he was right about much more than physics), but it's one kind of richer view. And if you think it's something exotic, you misunderstand it. It is an utterly ordinary, even commonsense way of looking at why things happen.

And an Aristotle's-four-causes kind of time is better than an Enlightenment-domino-causation kind of time, for a number of reasons. The best essay about time, which I cannot write, would encompass the better parts of what I have said above while remaining "normal" even when it underscored something extraordinary. Or at least would do better at that than I have.

Orthodoxy is not something absolutely unique; I have said

things here which I hope resonate with some sense of home whether or not you are Orthodox. When I moved from being an Evangelical to becoming Orthodox, I did not move from absolute error into absolute truth but from something partial to its full expression. (And there are other clarifications I haven't made, like how much of this essay is owed to Irenaeus and to John Behr helping Irenaeus come alive.) But let me close.

In Orthodoxy, here and now, there is an ordinary way to do what alchemy aimed at: be transfigured in a transfiguration that embraces the material world—and, as we have seen, time. Time is to be transmuted, or rather transfigured, until it becomes eternity.

How to Survive an Economic Depression

Want to survive?

I learned some pretty big things during the Y2k scare, and some of them have every relevance to how to survive an economic depression.

When year 2000 was approaching, I was part of the doomsday camp. I believed, wrongly, that technology would fail and everything around me would start to fall apart. But did a lot of digging and I think I learned something about what makes people survive really rough situations--and how to survive an economic depression. The economy is in deep trouble, and what I found out then has every relevance now that we are worried about how to survive an economic depression.

When Y2k was approaching, I found a lot of materials on *physical* preparation for such an event, but very little on *psychological* preparation. The most that I can remember reading about that was that when I said on a newsgroup that a Y2k doomsday would be psychologically as well as physically difficult, someone said that I was right and

suggested that Y2k preparations include stocking up on board games and condoms.

That answer seemed, to put it politely, not up to snuff. As far as mental preparation goes, that was the equivalent of saying, "If bad things happen on January 1 2000, be prepared for great physical danger. *Always* remember to look both ways before you cross the street!"

After failing to find something more informative on newsgroups, I went to the library, to look for more information on psychological survival in difficult situations. I did a lot of digging, reading whatever seemed like it might shed light, but finding very little of an answer *anywhere* that I looked. Even a book on psychology and the military said almost nothing about how either soldiers or civilians stood up psychologically to disaster, or what enables a survivor to overcome an incredibly difficult situation.

It was only after a lot of digging that I realized the answer was almost staring me in the face. What makes a survivor is not exactly *psychological*. It is *spiritual*. There was something spiritual about, for instance, people who had survived incredibly hostile situations as hostages and prisoners. It is not exactly that they had some special talent, or drew on some special mind trick or had developed what we would imagine as spiritual powers. It was something almost *pedestrian*.

It had something to do with religious devotion. Faith has something to do with how to survive an economic depression.

I imagine I may raise some eyebrows by suggesting faith has something to do with how to survive a disaster. But faith was how many people survived the Great Depression. Perhaps a great many survivors survived despite their useless faith, or maybe it was a crutch, but if it seems obvious to you that faith could have nothing to do with how

people survived the Great Depression, then I would ask you to entertain a possibility you might not have considered. Maybe they know something we have forgotten.

The more things change, the more they stay the same.

Much of the Bible comes from disastrous times. In the Bible's book of [Habakkuk](#), there is a prophet who sees great evil about him. He cries out to the Lord, and the Lord gives an answer that leaves the prophet stunned: the Lord will punish the wickedness of Israel by having an army of terrorists conquer their land. This was a disaster that might be worse than economic collapse. The prophet asks the Lord a question: how can a righteous God look on such wickedness? And the Lord responds without really answering the prophet's question: the Lord responds without giving the prophet what he wants. But tucked away in the Lord's response are some very significant words: "...the righteous shall live by faith."

Those words were taken up in the New Testament and became a rallying-cry against rigid legalism. But they are more than a response to people who turn religion into a bunch of rules; they speak also in situations where legalism is simply not the issue. The prophet cried out to the Lord about rampant violence. The issue was not really legalism at all. And this is when the words were first spoken: "The righteous shall live by faith." These words were given in terrifying times.

"The righteous shall live by faith" is a non-answer, and a quite deliberate non-answer. The prophet asked how such a pure God could allow such wickedness to exist, and God does not give the answer he is looking for. The Lord doesn't really answer the prophet's question at *all*. It's almost like:

Someone said to a master, "What about the

people who have never heard of Christ? Are they all automatically damned to Hell? Tell me; I have heard that you have studied this question."

The master said, "What you need to be saved is for you to believe in Christ, and you have heard of him."

The Lord doesn't tell the prophet what he wants. He gives him something much better; these brief words say, "[I AM WHO I AM](#), and I will do what I will do, and you may not look past the protecting veil that enshrouds me. But in the disastrous times you face, know this: the righteous shall live by faith."

God doesn't just refuse to tell the prophet what he *wants*. He gives Habakkuk something fundamentally richer and deeper. He tells the prophet what he *needs*. What God tells [Habakkuk](#), "The righteous shall live by faith," is a luminous thread appearing throughout Scripture, woven into the fabric of Proverbs and woven through and through in the [Sermon on the Mount](#). This luminous, radiant thread declares that God is sovereign, in hard times as well as good, and that his divine providence is with his faithful no less. *Even if we are in a depression, God can watch out for us.* (Perhaps *especially* if we are in a depression. The surprising report from many survivors is that God's help is much more obvious in hard times than when things are easy.) Just witness this luminous thread in the [Sermon on the Mount](#):

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Money.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor

about your body, what you shall wear. Is there not more to life than food, and more to the body than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by worrying can add one hour to his span of life? (You might as well try to worry yourself into being a foot and a half taller!) And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither work nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed as gloriously as one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith?

Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For people without faith seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be given to you as well.

Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will have its own things to worry about. Each day has enough worries of its own.

The righteous shall live by faith, and the Sermon on the Mount has a great deal to say about exactly *how* the righteous shall live by faith. The radiant thread unfolds, unfurls, *beams*, "Money is unworthy of your trust: put your trust in God. Live in the security of faith. Have the true security of faith in God who provides, not the ersatz providence of what you can arrange for yourself. Do not

spend your life building a sandcastle for your home and trying to keep it from collapsing. I offer you a way to build a solid house, built on the rock."

And this is not just a statement about how we should not worry about the future when we have it easy. The [Sermon on the Mount](#) closes with words that are entirely relevant to surviving the storms of life when we wonder how to survive an economic depression:

Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.

And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and its collapse was great.

These are not words about nothing more than how to relax and enjoy life when it is easy. These are words about how to prepare for hard times, and how to survive in a disaster. In other words, they are words about how to survive an economic depression.

In hard times as well as good, *the righteous shall live by faith*. Indeed, the words "the righteous shall live by faith" originally come from times with an industrial-strength disaster on the horizon!

The Apostle Paul: Portrait of a *survivor!*

Who can survive stress like an industrial-strength disaster? The Bible paints a picture of one person who survived a lot of really rough times, and not only *survived*, but genuinely *thrived*.

When I was in college, part of the general "foundations of wellness" class was taking the [Holmes Stress Point Scale](#), which assigns points for stressful events to add up to a rough estimate of how stressful your life is. You get a certain number of points for each stressful experience you've been through, and they add up to your total score for how stressful the past year of your life is. The events include:

- Jail term...
- Death of a close friend...
- Outstanding personal achievement...
- Vacation...
- Christmas...
- Minor violation of the law...

The higher a score from stressful events, the more stressful your life is. The scale's explanation is: *If your score is 300 or more, you are at a very high stress level and probably run a major risk of illness in the next year. If your score is 200 to 299, your stress and illness risk are moderate, and if your score is between 150 to 200, your stress and risk are mild.*

My teacher mentioned that one student had computed such a score for a year in the life of the Apostle Paul, who went through a number of events that should score major points for stress:

- Jailed...
- Attacked by a frenzied mob...
- Shipwrecked in the mother of all storms...

- Clandestine escape from a city when people were trying to kill him...
- Physically assaulted by soldiers...
- Survived an assassination attempt...

The student calculated a staggering 675 points for one year in the life of St. Paul!

But the odd thing is that if you read the [Book of Acts](#), St. Paul does not really come across as someone we should pity. We read that some of his colleagues were harassed, beaten, and afterwards were rejoicing that they had been counted worthy to suffer shame for the sake of their Lord. When I read [the accounts of these events](#), I walk away with a sense, not that these suffering heroes are poor and pitiable, but that they are giants and they utterly dwarf me. There is something greater in the Apostle, far greater, than a whopping 675 points worth of *externally* stressful events.

It is the same thing, really, as with people who survived a long time being hostages for terrorists. They had dug deep and built their house on the rock, and when stormwinds battered their house, it survived and stood firm. It is the same thing for the bedrock of how people survived the Great Depression. And if we may be battered by hard economic times, we would like our houses to stand firm as well.

Suffering and sonship

It may be that what we fear that in a potential disaster is that we will lose what is good for us. We may fear getting sidetracked when none of our dreams seem to come true. We may fear that God cannot really provide our good if our recession becomes a depression or even an economic collapse--that the [Sermon on the Mount](#) is presumably about how to live in easy times but wouldn't be quite so helpful when we're in a depression. But there is something

we are missing. Some of the things that we fear may have a surprisingly positive place in a well-lived life. There is something we are missing in all this.

Suffering has a place in the divine discipleship—the divine sonship—that the [Sermon on the Mount](#) is all about. "The Son of God became a man that men might become the Sons of God," as C.S. Lewis echoed the ancient wisdom, a wisdom that plays out in discipleship. Discipleship, service to God in difficulties, providence, and ascetical or spiritual practices all come together: God provides for us and disciples us in hard times as well as good. Sometimes he provides more plainly when we have nothing than when we have everything. In the [Philokalia](#), we hear the words of St. Makarios as he explains the place of suffering in discipleship:

He who wants to be an imitator of Christ, so that he too may be called a son of God, born of the Spirit, must above all bear courageously and patiently the afflictions he encounters, whether these be bodily illnesses, slander and vilification from men, or attacks from the unseen spirits. God in His providence allows souls to be tested by various afflictions of this kind, so that it may be revealed which of them truly loves Him. All the patriarchs, prophets, apostles and martyrs from the beginning of time traversed none other than this narrow road of trial and affliction, and it was by doing this that they fulfilled God's will. 'My son,' says Scripture, 'if you come to serve the Lord, prepare your soul for trial, set your heart straight, and patiently endure' (Ecclus. 2 : 1-2). And elsewhere it is said: 'Accept everything that comes as good, knowing that nothing occurs without God willing it.' Thus the soul that wishes to do God's will must strive above all to acquire patient endurance and hope. For one of the tricks

of the devil is to make us listless at times of affliction, so that we give up our hope in the Lord. God never allows a soul that hopes in Him to be so oppressed by trials that it is put to utter confusion. As St Paul writes: 'God is to be trusted not to let us be tried beyond our strength, but with the trial He will provide a way out, so that we are able to bear it (I Cor. 10 : 13). The devil harasses the soul not as much as he wants but as much as God allows him to. Men know what burden may be placed on a mule, what on a donkey, and what on a camel, and load each beast accordingly; and the potter knows how long he must leave pots in the fire, so that they are not cracked by staying in it too long or rendered useless by being taken out of it before they are properly fired. If human understanding extends this far, must not God be much more aware, infinitely more aware, of the degree of trial it is right to impose on each soul, so that it becomes tried and true, fit for the kingdom of heaven?

Hemp, unless it is well beaten, cannot be worked into fine yarn, while the more it is beaten and carded the finer and more serviceable it becomes. And a freshly moulded pot that has not been fired is of no use to man. And a child not yet proficient in worldly skills cannot build, plant, sow seed or perform any other worldly task. In a similar manner it often happens through the Lord's goodness that souls, on account of their childlike innocence, participate in divine grace and are filled with the sweetness and repose of the Spirit; but because they have not yet been tested, and have not been tried by the various afflictions of the evil spirits, they are still immature and not yet fit for the kingdom of

heaven. As the apostle says: 'If you have not been disciplined you are bastards and not sons' (Heb. 12 : 8). Thus trials and afflictions are laid upon a man in the way that is best for him, so as to make his soul stronger and more mature; and if the soul endures them to the end with hope in the Lord it cannot fail to attain the promised reward of the Spirit and deliverance from the evil passions.

The story is told of a woman who was told the Lord would be with her, and afterwards found herself an incredibly painful situation. When she cried out to the Lord and asked how this could be, the Lord answered: "I never said it would be easy. I said I'd be *with* you." God's way, it seems, is not to make things easy for us, but to strengthen us for greatness in what are often hard situations, and sometimes disasters. He gives us mountains to climb and the strength for climbing.

And we can climb mountains even if we are in an economic depression. Perhaps *especially* if we are in an economic recession. God's providence does not spare us from our suffering. Not even if we're really good Christians—*especially* not if we're really good Christians! If you read the saints' lives (see the links on [the natural cycle clock](#)), you will see that even with all the wondrous providence God provides for the saints, the saints in fact suffer much *more* than the rest of us; they know sufferings worse than most of us have ever been through.

There are saints whose prayers healed others—but who were for themselves never healed of their own major illnesses. If this sounds ironic, remember that Christ also was told, "Physician, heal thyself." Christ is pre-eminent as one who saved others but could not save himself, and "He saved others, but he cannot save himself" is one way of *defining* God's kingdom. Part of how people survived the

Great Depression was that they carried the spirit of God's kingdom and worked to save others, and not just themselves. Communities of people survived the Great Depression because, even if no one could save "Me! Me! Me!", perhaps each one could help save *others*.

God's providence does not spare us from our suffering, but he works with us *in* our suffering, often to do things with us that could never happen if we had things our way. It may be precisely *on* the mountain, *in* the act of climbing, that God gives us the strength to climb!

Sometimes God works with us despite our best efforts to fix things so we can have things our way. Wise people rightly tells us, "Life is what happens while you're busy making other plans," and "You can't always get what you want." And perhaps if we did get what we wanted, we wouldn't get what God wanted for us. Some of us may try to fix our problems and pray to God to take them away—when his plan is to use our problems to build us up. St. Makarios above quotes [Hebrews](#), and in fact [Hebrews](#) is one of the clearest books of the Bible that God works with us in suffering—in fact, that Christ himself was perfected by suffering (source):

But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one. For it was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering.

Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered and been

tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted. Therefore, holy brethren, who share in a heavenly call, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession.

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchiz'edek.

...But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on the prisoners, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that you may do the will of God and receive what is promised.

Our view of suffering is often that if we are suffering, then we cannot be where we should be. It often seems we can only be where we should be when we are *out* of a difficult situation). It seems that we are sidetracked, and will only stop being sidetracked when we have things our way. But that is absolutely false. God worked with Christ in suffering. God worked with the saints in suffering. God worked with us in suffering. And that means that we can be in suffering

and in pain, with our godly plans failing, and we are still just where God wants us: we may not see it, but sometimes our earthly failure is a heavenly victory. If God allows us to be in an economic collapse, he may be doing things with us, good things, that we might never happen if we had the comfort we seem to need. The last words above, about suffering and failure, lead *directly* into [the famous "faith hall of fame" in Hebrews 11.](#)

What may be happening in our sufferings is that God is building us into greater people than if we succeed in getting what we want. Including if we are in an economic depression. This is a basic lesson of people growing up: many young people have big dreams for themselves, but grow by middle age into living for others, growing into something that could never happen if all their youthful dreams came true. And suffering has a place in this—and a greater and deeper value. The Son of God was made perfect through suffering. Innocent suffering is sharing in the suffering of Christ: Christ's suffering is made perfect in his people. St. Paul, the survivor who went through terrible suffering, wrote, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions." ([Col 1.24 RSV](#))

Suffering is *not* getting off-track, nor does it force us out of God's plans, so that we only get into God's providence as soon as things are the way we would like. What some of us fear in suffering is that if we are in difficult circumstances, then that must mean we are spiritual failures as well as failing on earth. If we are faithful and still fail in our plans, this does not mean that either God's plans or providence have failed. Often he is working at us when we are suffering and we are so far afield from anything that makes sense to us.

Everything we meet is either a blessing from God, or a trial that God allows for our strengthening. You may say that

there is something evil in your trials, and you would be entirely right: there is something evil, and perhaps demonic, in our trials and afflictions. Perhaps you may say that there seems to be something almost demonic about an economic collapse, and you would still be right. But, as C.S. Lewis observes, *all of us do the will of God*. We may do the will of God as Satan and Judas did, as *instruments*, or we may do the will of God as Peter and John did, as *sons*. But all of us do the will of God, and ultimately Satan and may be no more than a hammer in God's hand. And even if God allows rough trials, he allows them for our strengthening. St. Makarios is very clear: "The devil harasses the soul not as much as he wants but as much as God allows him to." Evil is on a leash. Let us be faithful. Every move the Devil plays is one move closer to his loss and God's victory, and ours if we are faithful.

I am not saying that the future holds much suffering. You or I may have a lot of suffering, or actually not that much. I am, however, saying that however much suffering God allows, he can still work with us. He can still work with us in an economic depression. (And that is even *without* going into how a great many people have been in situations they dreaded, and found life to still be beautiful.) As St. Paul, a survivor, closed [Romans 8](#):

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For thy sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus

our Lord.

Building a house on the rock—it's *not all about you!*

Ascesis refers to disciplined spiritual practice. It's a part of building a house on the rock. In the Orthodox tradition, these include sacraments, church attendance and daily liturgical prayers, reading and listening to Scripture, working to keep the Jesus prayer in your heart ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner"), growing into the liturgical seasons and internal and external fasting, hospitality, service, thanksgiving, repentance, giving to others who ask your help, cutting back on selfish pleasures, including icons in your prayer, solitude, community, and other practices. All of these can offer different help in growing to spiritual maturity.

But there comes a crucial caveat. None of these, if they are working correctly, are all about us. However essential they are to building a house on the rock, they are infinitely more than tools for how to survive an economic depression. They are tools to living in communion with God and being transformed by his grace. These disciplines, used rightly, can clear away obstacles to our growing in discipleship under God, but if they are used wrongly, they can be extremely harmful.

Using ascetical practices wrongly, as ends in themselves, has the same problem as Eeyore in [The House at Pooh Corner](#):

[Piglet picked some violets, decided to give them to Eeyore, and went to visit him.]

"Oh, Eeyore," began Piglet a little nervously, because Eeyore was busy.

"To-morrow," said Eeyore. "Or the next day." Piglet came a little closer to see what it was. Eeyore had three sticks on the ground, and was looking at them. Two of the sticks were touching at one end, but not at the other, and the third stick was laid across them. Piglet thought that perhaps it was a Trap of some kind.

"Oh, Eeyore," he began again, "I just—"

"Is that little Piglet?" said Eeyore, still looking hard at his sticks.

"Yes, Eeyore, and I—"

"Do you know what this is?"

"No," said Piglet.

"It's an A."

"Oh," said Piglet.

"Not O—A," said Eeyore severely. "Can't you hear, or do you think you have more education than Christopher Robin?"

"Yes," said Piglet. "No," said Piglet very quickly, and he came closer still.

"Christopher Robin said it was an A, and an A it is—until somebody treads on it," Eeyore added sternly.

Piglet jumped backwards hurriedly, and smelt at his violets.

"Do you know what A means, little Piglet?"

"No, Eeyore, I don't."

"It means Learning, it means Education, it means all the things that you and Pooh haven't got. That's what A means."

"Oh," said Piglet again. "I mean, does it?" he explained quickly.

"I'm telling you. People come and go in this Forest, and they say, 'It's only Eeyore, so it doesn't count.' They walk to and fro saying 'Ha ha!' But do they know anything about A? They don't. It's just three sticks to them. But to the Educated—mark this, little Piglet—to the Educated, not meaning Poohs and Piglets, it's a great and glorious A. Not," he added, "just something that anybody can come and breathe on."

Piglet stepped back nervously, and looked round for help.

"Here's Rabbit," he said gladly. "Hallo, Rabbit."

Rabbit came up importantly, nodded to Piglet, and said, "Ah, Eeyore," in the voice of one who would be saying "Good-bye" in about two more minutes.

"There's just one thing I wanted to ask you, Eeyore. What happens to Christopher Robin in the mornings nowadays?"

"What's this that I'm looking at?" said Eeyore, still looking at it.

"Three sticks," said Rabbit promptly.

"You see?" said Eeyore to Piglet. He turned to Rabbit. "I will now answer your question," he said solemnly.

"Thank you," said Rabbit.

"What does Christopher Robin do in the mornings? He learns. He becones Educated. He instigorate—I think that is the word he mentioned, but I may be referring to something else—he instigorate Knowledge. In my small way, I also, if I have the word right, am—am doing what he does. That, doe instance is?"

"An A," said Rabbit, "but not a very good one. Well, I must get back and tell the others."

Eeyore looked at his sticks and then he looked at Piglet.

"What did Rabbit say it was?" he asked.

"An A," said Piglet.

"Did you tell him?"

"No, Eeyore, I didn't. I expect he just knew."

"He knew? You mean this A thing is a thing Rabbit knew?"

"Yes, Eeyore. He's very clever, Rabbit is."

"Clever!" said Eeyore scornfully, putting a foot heavily on his three sticks. "Education!" said Eeyore bitterly, jumping on his six sticks. "What is Learning?" asked Eeyore as he kicked his twelve sticks into the air. "A thing Rabbit knows! Ha!"

We need to avoid being Eeyores with our spiritual discipline, or our spirituality, or our faith, or our religion. Letters serve a greater purpose, and so do ascetical practices: we should not, like Eeyore, stare at an A and tell ourselves that it is our Education and Learning, or Prayers and Church Attendance as the case may be.

The point of ascetical practices is to be steps of the Great Dance: living the life that God shares, and becoming one of the sons of God. It's not merely a set of survival skills that work in an economic recession or depression, or even an economic collapse, even if "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will have its own worries. Each day has enough trouble of its own," is quite practical advice. The point is to seek first the kingdom of a God who knows our survival needs: as God told Habakkuk before a disaster, "The righteous shall live by faith." The luminous thread beams brightly because it is more than just a white thread. It *shines*, and it shines with the light of Heaven, a light of divine love that illumines Creation.

What Eeyore doesn't get about the luminous thread is that it is the light of Heaven shining on earth.

Better than an endowment

Some years before I became Orthodox, I was at a class where someone was commenting on Proverbs, and its texts

that say, in essence, "Put your trust in God, not money." ("Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death," [Prov 11:4 RSV](#).) One point he made that particularly surprised me was, "Endowments aren't so great."

He asked a question: if we want to be independently wealthy, who do we want the "independently" to mean we are independent from? The answer he gave: "*Independent from God*." If we want to be independently wealthy, we may want something more than mere luxuries. The basic fantasy of life as we imagine ourselves being independently wealthy, is a life that is in control and unlike the actual messiness of our real lives with so many things that are simply beyond our control. And his suggestion, based on real life as well as Proverbs, is that it is actually not good for us to have an endowment that we can trust.

One kind of person counselors work with is the person who cannot be happy without being in control of everyone around them. The basic problem is that a person who needs to be in control is a tragically shrunken person, and part of what a counselor will try to give a person is an opportunity to step into a larger world. If you believe, "I can't be happy unless I'm in control of everyone I'm involved with," that will set you up for a lot of unhappiness.

This is not just because it is really hard to control everyone else. A few people who want to control others really do manage to control others around them, but they are really as unhappy as others who want the same thing but don't manage the control over others they always want to establish. As Chesterton observed, there may be some desires which are not achievable, but there *are* some desires which are not *desirable*.

If you want the world to be small enough that there is nothing outside your control, you want to live in a small and terribly shrunken world. If you let go of that kind of control,

you may find that you have let yourself into a much bigger world than if you were the biggest thing around, and in the process you become bigger yourself. Instead of being a tin god ruling a world as cramped as a cubicle, you become servant in God's vast mansions. And being one of many of these servants is a much better position to be in than dominating as a tin god.

And there is more to this larger world, the larger world of serving in God's great mansions. The words, "The righteous shall live by faith" were given, in full force, when a brutal invasion was coming. Those words may not originally have been about how to survive an economic depression. They were originally more about how to survive something worse: your country being taken over by terrorists!

The words, "The righteous shall live by faith," and the [Sermon on the Mount](#), apply to some pretty rough situations, *including* an economic recession, economic depression, or economic collapse. Christ's words about not worrying do not apply just to privileged people who have nothing seriously worth worrying about; many of the people who first heard the [Sermon on the Mount](#) were on the *bottom* of the totem pole and would see less material comfort than the kind of person most Americans would imagine as a homeless person.

The model prayer Christ would give is not a prayer for something nicer for people stuck on a nasty diet of burgers and KFC; the one physical request is for *bread*—by American standards, quite a dull thing to eat day in and day out, and possibly poorer nutritional fare than fast food—and it is in *this* context that Christ, in the [Sermon on the Mount](#), beckons us to store up treasure in Heaven, and invites us to a spiritual feast that unfurls in hard times as well as when everything meets our expectations. He invites us to the spiritual feast, the larger world, that is at the heart of spirituality and religion and is unlocked by faith. The

[Sermon on the Mount](#) neither assumes nor needs a high standard of living to have real treasure.

The invitation to dance the Great Dance is open to us now as ever. All of us are invited to the Great Feast. Even if we've snubbed words like, "Money doesn't make you happy," and, "The best things in life are free," not only do those truths remain open to us, but the Divine Providence is no less open. If our external circumstances remove all the luxuries that serve us, we may discover that not only is it better to give than receive, but it is also better to serve and be served. We might take a tip from how people survived the Great Depression. If we are unemployed, we might serve others and find something that technologies and luxuries can't give, and if our 401(k) plan becomes a 404(k) and vanishes, we might lean on God's providence and discover that God's providence gives us more than money could.

There's a sign that was seen around my hometown that says, "Money may not do everything, but it sure keeps the kids in touch!" And I wonder if that is precisely what we gain if we do not know what will meet our needs in the future: our material needs can "keep the kids in touch" for God. Especially in an economy in shambles. And if that happens, we have something no money could buy: keeping in touch with God in a way that is ultimately a Heavenly transformation.

The prodigal son: "I wish you were dead!"

The parable of the prodigal son begins ([source](#)):

There was a man who had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them.

Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have fed on the husks that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself he said, `How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants.'" And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, `Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

But the father said to his servants, `Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet; and bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.

Today, one of the ways parents might give money to children is letting them "borrow against their inheritance:" they wouldn't have to pay the money back, but they lose that much of their inheritance when their parents die. And

this is considered a fairly normal arrangement.

This *isn't* what is going on here. The younger son's request telegraphs something loud and clear: "I wish you were dead!"

We see a first glimpse of God's love—a love to the point of madness. Out of all responses the father could have to this affront, he gave every last penny he was asked for. The love to the point of madness may be easier to see later on, but it is already present in the gift by which he answers the ludicrously inappropriate request.

The son goes off to live life the way he wants to. And living life the way he wants to hits rock bottom. The big party he imagined he'd make for himself turns into famine and dire straits that leave him coveting the unappetizing husks that he is feeding to unclean, vile swine. He thought things would be better if he were calling the shots, not his father.

He thought things would be better if he were calling the shots. Just like some of us here. We don't want to have to wait under the authority of a Father who calls the shots. We want money and control, with things lined up here and now. What is it we are telling God if we ask him to give us money and control on our terms? Something a bit like, "I wish you were dead."

The younger son has discovered that life with his father out of the picture is not so glorious and wonderful. And he realizes the extent of his fall. So he resolves to go back and beg, not even for forgiveness, but possibly his father might even contain his wounded resentment enough to let him work for pay and be able to buy bread. (Who knows? Maybe a long shot, but what real alternative did he have?)

What was the father doing in all of this?

When husbands have gone off to war, there have been wives who have stood by the path of the doorway, looking for some hope that their husbands may return, looking and

waiting, hour after hour, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year... *never* giving up! And the father in our story was doing *exactly* that.

The father was looking, waiting, and saw his son far off, and completely cast off his upper-class dignity to run and embrace him. Love to the point of madness! He didn't even wait for an apology before embracing him and kissing him!

And when the son made a full confession, hoping maybe to toil for his father's scraps, the father pulls out all the stops: the best robe, a ring for his finger, and the best food possible for a royal feast. *This is love to the point of madness!*

But the story continues on to a more sobering note ([source](#)):

Now his older son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, `Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' But he was angry and refused to go in.

His father came out and pleaded with him, but he answered his father, `Look, I have served you for all of these years, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a goat kid, that I might make merry with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with prostitutes, you killed for him the fatted calf!'

And he said to him, `Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'"

We have an Eeyore here.

This story has been called the parable of the two prodigals, meaning that not only did the one son tragically fall, but the other, elder son also tragically falls from the glory his father would have wished for him. At the beginning, the younger son wished that his father was dead. At the end, did the older son wish his father was dead?

The older son is a tragic spiritual Eeyore.

His statement could have come from a very different angle. For all of the years the older son was in his father's service, he toiled, and he may not have had rich party food—only solid, nourishing, ordinary food day by day. For all these many years, he worked hard in the context of the father training him, and drawing him into mature manhood. In the meantime, his brother has been ripping up his own soul, losing even what he thought he had at the mercy of merciless people with no one else who cared for his well-being. The brother who all but told his father, "I wish you were dead," was in every sense save the literal, himself *dead*.

If it is painful to lose one's parents, it is another level of pain to lose one's child, and the father had seen one of his sons—not to mention the older son's only brother—die a living death. Now he was back, and in every sense *including* the literal, alive. Was killing the fatted calf even *enough* of a celebration?

The older son didn't get it. How well did his service to his father work? Not very well; it went badly enough that instead of sharing in his father's joy at a lost son who "was dead, and is alive again," acts bitterly affronted and indicts his father searingly. Which is to say, the son's hard work didn't *work*, any more than Eeyore's laborious staring at his three sticks achieved the true heart of "Learning" and "Education."

The point, though, is not really the tragedy of the older son. The point is that God welcomes people who turn to him, and welcomes them with open arms. It is only one step to turn to God, even if you think you are ten thousand steps away. But when are we ready?

It is easy enough to wait for life to *really* begin. When? Maybe when the present illness is gone, or when we get that promotion, or maybe just when we get a job in the first place, or when someone we deal with will become not quite so difficult a person, or when we have something paid off, or when Washington gets its act together. When something big or small changes, *then* maybe we will be in God's blessing. St. Herman of Alaska met some people who were waiting for their lives to *really* begin ([source](#)):

Father Herman gave them all one general question: "Gentlemen, what do you love above all, and what will each of you wish for your happiness?" Various answers were offered... Some desired wealth, others glory, some a beautiful wife, and still others a beautiful ship he would captain; and so forth in the same vein. "Is it not true," Father Herman said to them concerning this, "that all your various wishes can bring us to one conclusion - that each of you desires that which in his own understanding he considers the best, and which is most worthy of his love?" They all answered, "Yes, that is so!" He then continued, "Would you not say, 'Is not that which is best, above all, and surpassing all, and that which by preference is most worthy of love, the Very Lord, our Jesus Christ, who created us, adorned us with such ideals, gave life to all, sustains everything, nurtures and loves all, who is Himself Love and most beautiful of all men?' Should we not then love God above everything, desire Him more than anything, and search him

out?"

All said, "Why, yes! That's self-evident!" Then the Elder asked, "But do you love God?" They all answered, "Certainly, we love God. How can we not love God?" "And I a sinner have been trying for more than forty years to love God, I cannot say that I love Him completely," Father Herman protested to them. He then began to demonstrate to them the way in which we should love God. "If we love someone," he said, "we always remember them; we try to please them. Day and night our heart is concerned with the subject. Is that the way you gentlemen love God? Do you turn to Him often? Do you always remember Him? Do you always pray to Him and fulfill His holy commandments?" They had to admit that they did not! "For our own good, and for our own fortune," continued the Elder, "let us at least promise ourselves that from this very minute we will try to love God more than anything and to fulfill His Holy Will!"

The time for God is not at some indefinite point in the future when things will fit our hopes better. The time to work with God, in a sense the only time we should be concerned with, is now. Not later, *now*.

More precious than gold

When I was a child, I remembered a story about a fearsome dragon who told a knight that if the knight would tickle the dragon's throat with a sword, he would have a great treasure. The knight rode up on his horse and approached the dragon, already afraid, and asked if the treasure was as good as a good horse and a good suit of armor. It was more,

the dragon said. The knight asked if the treasure was as good as a silver suit of armor, and shield and sword to match. It was, the dragon assured him. The knight then asked if the treasure was better than gold. The dragon answered that it was more precious than rooms full of gold. So the terrified knight trembled and tickled the dragon's throat with his sword, and asked what the treasure was. And the dragon turned and ripped the knight's sword out of his hand, breathing out a tremendous deluge of fire and smoke and roared, "*Your life!*" And the terrified knight, having lost his sword, fled as best he could, and grasped a treasure far more precious than rooms and rooms full of gold.

Hard times may still let us know what is truly important, and what is truly treasure.

Even if we are in an economic depression, we have a treasure worth more than rooms and rooms full of gold: our lives.

For the righteous who walk by faith, hard times may even turn out to be good times.

St. John Chrysostom once wrote to people who think they are somebody if they conspicuously ride on a horse and have an armed servant clear the way before them, and told them that they were missing something and have *all* the wrong priorities. These words seem like they have nothing to do with how to survive in an economic depression—but on a very deep level, they have *everything* to do with how to survive in an economic depression where we may lose any number of things that seem so essential. St. John Chrysostom wrote ([source](#)):

And I know that I am disgusting my hearers. But what can I do? I have set my mind on this and will not stop saying these things, whether or not anything comes of it. For what is the point of

having someone clear the way before you in the marketplace? Are you walking among wild beasts so that you need to drive away those who meet you? Do not be afraid of the people who approach you and walk near you; none of them bite. But why do you consider it an insult to walk alongside other people? What craziness is this, what ludicrous folly, when you don't mind having a horse follow close behind you, but if it is a person, you think you are disgraced unless the person is driven a hundred miles away. And why do you have servants to carry horse _____, using the free as slaves, or rather yourself living more dishonorably than any slave? For truly, anyone who bears so much pride is more repulsive than any slave.

Therefore people who have enslaved themselves to this vile habit will never come within sight of true liberty. No, if you must drive away and clear away anything, do not let it be those who come near you, but your own pride. Do not do this by your servant, but by yourself, not by this material weapon, but by the spiritual one. Since now your servant drives away those who walk alongside you, but you yourself are driven from your rightful place by your own self-will, more disgracefully than any servant can drive your neighbor. But if, descending from your horse, you will drive away pride by humility, you will sit higher and place yourself in greater honor, without needing any servant to do this for you. I mean that when you have become modest and walk on the ground, you will be seated on the horse-drawn carriage of humility which carries you up to the very heavens, the carriage with winged steeds: but if falling from the horse-

drawn carriage of heaven, you pass into that of arrogance, you will be in no better state than crippled beggars who are carried along the ground—no, much more wretched and pathetic than they are: since they are carried because of their bodies' weakness, but you because of the disease of your own arrogance.

Some of us also need the carriage of humility, even if we are not even in a position to make everybody get out of our way. And some of us might benefit from the loving interdependence that was how people survived the Great Depression.

In tough times—and in tougher times—we may lose things we have set our hearts on, but it may be that however much we resist, God will give us something better. What if I lose my car, for instance? How could I get something better? But it is entirely possible that I could get something better than my present car. I might get something better than my own Rolls Royce, even better than my own private jet. I might get more *inter*-dependence, where *I* do not get around by what *I* do by *my* car. I may still be able to go places, but now by the love of my friends and family.

In that case, if I get some groceries, or a ride to church, I am not getting it as something run by me, me, me; I am riding on community and love. And the love of another who cares about me is a much bigger thing than economic self-sufficiency. It's the same thing as food tasting better if it is prepared with love for hospitality—then it isn't just food. You are, in a very real sense, eating a friend's love, and that is a richer and deeper kind of sustenance—and a richer, deeper, and fuller *goodness*!

Who knows? I might ride even higher than this if my car is taken from me. Perhaps I might respond to the humiliation of losing my car by starting to let Christ chauffeur me to

Heaven in the flying Rolls-Royce of humility. Maybe I might even start being grateful, and be carried by the car of gratitude, and look for ways that I might launch into the heavens on the immense celestial starship of service to others.

And it is the starship of service to others—of saving others even though I cannot save myself—that shines with celestial glory. "It is more blessed to give than to receive"—the [Sermon on the Mount](#) again. Perhaps I might stop thinking about my own survival and instead think about how I can save others even though I cannot save myself. Some people did not just survive the Great Depression; they learned that life is beautiful. They stopped being tin gods trying to rule over a shrunken world and became servants of God and each other in the vast mansions of a glorious God. In the Great Depression, they did not have gold, but they grasped a treasure vaster than rooms and rooms full of gold. For some, the Great Depression was a wakeup call to what is truly important in life.

And that is true wealth.

Why are some of us not living this way already? Repentance is terrifying. In the tale of the prodigal son, the son who had devoured his father's property was in far from his father's house, and had real work to get back. He had to *travel* in a much rougher sense than taking a plane, train, or bus, and faced much nastier dangers than "Dinner in New York, breakfast in London, luggage in Sydney."

Our word "travel" comes from the French *travailler*, referring to work, and not exactly easy work: with slightly different spelling, the same word appears in English as "travail," meaning a mother's struggle in childbirth. Travel was hard, gruelling, and dangerous labor, and not for the faint of heart. And the prodigal son undertook travel with far less of the strength—not to mention absolutely none of the wealth—by which he had gotten there. The feat would

have been comparable to running a marathon, or at least a marathon where your path might well go through the turf of thugs lying in wait and quite willing to kill anyone who would *travail* into their ambush.

And yet this is exactly what the prodigal son did. His brother may have done the ascetical work of prayers and fasting; but the younger son undertook something much tougher: repentance which is, in a spiritual sense, what the younger son did to return home.

Repentance has been called unconditional surrender. It has been called other things as well, and it terrifies: it is a decision to return home and beg for mercy when you have no grounds to expect to be treated like anything but the vilest of the scum of the earth. Perhaps the Father's love to the point of madness may respond otherwise when we have repented. Perhaps we when we surrender conditionally and expect to be razed to the ground, we find ourselves walking away triumphant victors whose refusal to surrender was holding on to defeat for dear life, terrified to let go of our defeat because we think it helps us. Perhaps we have nothing, really, to lose but our misery. But that isn't our concern when we need to repent.

But if we can repent—for all of us have much to repent of—and step into the [Sermon on the Mount](#) and begin to live by faith, then the Father's love will answer, and give us something better than whatever we grasp for in our forgetfulness that a provident God already knows our needs just as well in an economic depression as any other time. In an economic depression as much as any other time, the Father's love can meet these needs much better than we will if we control our inheritance ourselves.

In hard times in the past the Lord's arm and providence have shown more plainly than they sometimes do here. Do you want to know how to survive an economic depression? The answer is very simple. It's not a matter of what you

arrange. It's a matter of what *God* provides. When there is no natural hope of God's saints being taken care of, it may be a supernatural providence that we don't see as often when we have easy times.

In hard times as well as easy, the luminous thread woven throughout Scripture, appearing in one place in the words, "the just shall live by faith," and another place in a [Sermon on the Mount](#) that says, "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and his perfect righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you"—this luminous thread is at the heart of faith, spirituality, and religion—and this luminous thread is more. It is a participation in the life of a God of love to the point of madness.

The luminous thread is spun by a God of love to the point of madness.

It may be in hard times that we fear that in hard times we will lose what is good for us.

But it may be that hard times, whether a recession, depression, or economic collapse, serve as a divinely given clue-by-four when we discover that the Father's love to the point of madness knows, and will give, what is much better for us. And on that point, I would like to quote a praise song about what is truly more precious than gold: the words go:

Lord, you are more precious than silver.
 Lord, you are more costly than gold.
 Lord, you are more beautiful than diamonds,
 And nothing I desire compares to you.

In one variant, these words answer:

And the Father said:
 "Child, you are more precious than silver.
 Child, you are more costly than gold.
 Child, you are more beautiful than diamonds,
 And nothing I desire compares to you."

These are the words of divine love to the point of madness, of a God who loves saints and sinners alike, of a God who rejoices more over one sinner who repents than ninety-nine righteous who do not need to repent. And this is a God who loves us in hard times as well as good, a God of providence who seeks our highest good whenever we turn to him.

God be merciful to us. (Amen!)

On Humor

Two parallel translations

Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor *jesting*, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks. (Ephesians 5:4, KJV)

Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or *coarse joking*, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving. (Ephesians 5:4, NIV)

Let me put a question, for which I have quoted this verse in two different translations, the King James Version and the New International Version. *This verse refers to humor. Does it refer only to off-color humor, or humor as a whole?*

I will be building up to an answer taken from the first-class humorist Mark Twain: "**The secret source of humor itself is not joy, but sorrow. There is no humor in Heaven.**"

A look at the Greek turns up a Greek term *eutrapelia* which only occurs here; it is not mentioned in Kittel's (unabridged) *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, but there is an entry for *Strong's Greek Lexicon*:

Eutrapelia

wit, liveliness

eutrapelia

witticism, i.e. (in a vulgar sense) ribaldry

Derivation: from a compound of G2095 and a derivative of the base of G5157 (meaning well-turned, i.e. ready at repartee, jocosely);

KJV Usage: jesting. G2095 G5157

Thayer:

- 1) pleasantry, humour, facetiousness
- 2) in a bad sense
- 2a) scurrility, ribaldry, low jesting

The ambiguity is there in the Greek, which can mean witty repartee, humor as a whole, or vulgar humor specifically. The immediate context suggests coarse speech, but I would be wary of simply concluding that the verse only deals with lewd humor alone. The *Philokalia* gives encyclopaedic lists of vices, and some of them list jokes; in context coarse jokes are condemned but the condemnation is not limited to lewd humor. One thing we might miss if we simply try to resolve an ambiguity and ask, "Does the verse refer to off-color humor alone, or humor as a whole?" is that **the quintessential joke, [the bread and butter of rec.humor.funny](#) , [the joke that has its own Wikipedia entry](#) , is the obscene one: the joke that is good enough for polite company is just hanging along for the ride.**

(In which case the ambiguity of "joking" vs. "coarse joking" could be resolved that the verse applies principally and primarily to coarse joking, but extends naturally to joking in general.)

But let us leave that for the time being. And let us give the benefit of the doubt to the interpretation of one word in one verse: even if I am raising a concern about humor as such, including good, clean humor, one word in one verse is not

the best place to argue from. Besides the *Philokalia* can include jokes and laughter when an author tries to catalogue every vice, I am concerned about Mark Twain's "The secret source of humor is not joy but sorrow; there is no humor in Heaven." I am concerned because my best sense is that he was right.

One time when my spiritual senses were being honed (during the discipline of a fast), I noticed something as a dialogue went on. I told the father of a kid I bantered with, "[Name] hurt my feelings." The kid said, "How did I do *that*?" And I replied, "Fess up, [Name]. Then we'll both know." And that time I noticed something; something in my end of the dialogue felt like a spiritual scream. My eyes were being opened to something laced in my humor; no complaint about either of the guys I was talking with but there was something I sensed in my many favorite jokes that tasted sweet but left you not realizing you were sick afterwards. To give one example:

Someone decided to become an icefisher. So he got a bunch of equipment, went on the ice, and drilled down a couple of inches when a deep, booming voice said, "There are no fish there!"

The surprised icefisher took up his gear, moved over fifty feet, and began to drill down. He got down just half an inch when a deep, booming voice said, "There are no fish there!"

He moved over a hundred feet more, looked around, and the deep, booming voice said yet again, "Nor are there any fish there!"

The icefisher looked around and asked, "Who are you, God?"

The deep, booming voice said, "No! I'm the arena

manager!"

The secret source of this joke's humor is pain. It smuggles in more pain than you would imagine at first: someone is idiot enough to try to go ice fishing in a hockey arena. And the humor comes when that pain is pulled into the open. Nor, really, is the pain just for the people in the joke. The joke is a pleasure laced with pain. Perhaps there is [a pleasure-pain syndrome where pleasure is laced with pain](#), but here we do not notice we have been sickened.

I once thought this joke would have been a good basis for a homily, to paint a picture where people ask of someone who dares to speak decisively in morals, "Who do you think you are? God?" and we reply that we're just arena employees. But to a friend I was talking to, and to me, there was something that seemed wrong about using this joke in a homily even when it might serve as an excellent springboard.

Not all jokes are created equal: the crass vulgarity is more wrong than the clean joke and the sidesplitting joke you repeat is more wrong than the spontaneous banter, but there is a line of continuity between all of these, between the cleanest and the most foul.

So is there good news?

I would place two mental images in opposition to each other, in response to the question, "Is there any good news?" One is a place I worked where there was constant lewd joking; overall I got the impression that the obscene banter was a desperate bid to say something interesting, from people who could have had any number of interesting discussions. The chief effect I remember experiencing was not exactly being offended, but drained and drained. If an off-color jab is a desperate bid to say something interesting,

it is not exciting, but dreary: if the most interesting thing you have to say are the same five dirty jokes, how great is that dullness!

The other image I would place opposite it is a priest standing, eyes closed, silent, intently concentrated in prayer. He is joyful, but the overall striking image is less joy than silence that speaks volumes. And this priest does not tell jokes, at least not often. But humor is not something missing from this priest. Maybe he does have a sense of humor and a few favorite jokes; I don't know. But what he has is better than funny, and what he gives others is better than a joke, however funny. He has and shares joy, and the rapt silence which is among his greatest treasures is also something he shares to the best of his ability.

Mark Twain said, "There is no humor in Heaven." If it seems natural to ask, "I *like* jokes. What consolation will I have if I give them up?" the answer is simply, "Heaven."

When I was moving towards Orthodoxy, an Orthodox friend warned me that he had found Orthodoxy to be "a long road of pain and loss". This he said, not to deter me from Orthodoxy, but so I could "know what you are getting into." And his words have proven true, but there is something he didn't tell me. The very real road of pain and loss has cost things I'd never imagine I'd be giving up, but the pain and loss have been the pain and loss of dislodging pieces of Hell and making room for a fuller grasp of Heaven. [Orthodoxy has cost me my interest in fantasy](#), which is the same as saying that it cost me desires for things that were not real and I could not *ever* have, and given me in place desires for things that were real and a fuller desire for the One who is supremely Real. [Orthodoxy has cost me my almost religious "faith" in science](#), which is ultimately to say that it has cost me answering some of the wrong questions. [Orthodoxy has cost me trying to sate myself on pleasures](#), and cleared a distraction from things that offer genuine satisfaction. If

Orthodoxy costs me an interest in humor, it may be so that I can live here on earth the Heaven that has never known humor's sorrow. If Orthodoxy bids me say farewell to my search for earthly honors (I really have enough), it is so that I may search for Heavenly honors: the only honors that really matter. **In all these things God is at work to give me the maximum in life.**

The details and particular journey will be different for different people; this post and The Pleasure-Pain Syndrome pull from the *Philokalia*, but pull mint, dill, and cumin where the *Philokalia* offer justice, mercy, and faith. The *Philokalia* offer detailed discussions about how we are lured into different demonic traps, but the discussion of jokes is trivial by comparison with the discussion of unchastity. If it is even trivial. It does not occupy center stage, ever, but there is something worth unfolding, and it is particularly worth unfolding here and now.

We live in a time of pleasure seeking where pleasure delivery systems like Viagra *sell*. We also live in a time of lesser pleasures: pleasure delivery systems like televisions and smartphones *sell*. And we do not say with St. Paul, "When I became a man, I put childish pleasure-seeking behind me." And in this context, it can stretch us to say, "Jokes are nice, but I'm trying to avoid them and move on to bigger things." One could more sharply cite the Desert Fathers, "The Last Judgment awaits, and you laugh?", but we can say, "Sorry; it's powered by hidden pain; I'm looking for my happiness from other sources." And we can make a small step to move on to bigger things.

Could you cut back on jokes, just a little?

Incarnation and Deification

The Word became flesh

Especially when we are preparing for the Feast of the Nativity, when the Word became flesh, we would do well to meditate on *why* the Word became flesh:

The Son of God became a Man that men might become the sons of God. The divine became human so that the human might become divine. God and the Son of God became Man and the Son of Man that men and the sons of men might become gods and the sons of God:

The Word became flesh that flesh might become Word.

The chief end of mankind

The Westminster Catechism famously opens:

Question: What is the chief end of mankind?

Answer: The chief end of mankind is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

It is often (and rightly) pointed out that these are the same thing: to glorify God and to enjoy him forever are the exact same thing. The chief end of mankind is to contemplate God. And one thread of this is woven into St. John's prologue: "The Word became flesh, and tabernacled among us, and we have seen his glory, as of the only-begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." The disciples saw the uncreated Light of the Holy Transfiguration, and contemplated it.

But St. John the Theologian does not truncate contemplation. This follows, "But to as many as received him, he gave the authority to become the sons of God." And contemplation and theosis/deification/divinization, becoming sons of God, are not two competing answers to the question, "What is the chief end of mankind?" Far from it: they are expressions of the same truth. Contemplating the uncreated Light, and being transformed to be one of the sons of God, are two connected aspects of the same goal. They come together, and we might well quote for contemplation of God words also spoken of the Eucharist: "Behold what you believe. Become what you behold." For contemplation and theosis are of the same essence. They are of the same essence almost as the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are of the same essence.

Now it may need to be pointed out that God, and God alone, can be divine by nature. If theosis is open to us, there is no question of our becoming also divine by nature. That is impossible. God's great work is to make us become by grace what he is by nature, and the infinite gulf between Uncreated and created can never be erased. But it can be transcended by a God who transcends not only Creation but transcends transcendence itself. And when his grace is at work, our spiritual sins and wounds remain, and we remain created, but that is no longer the point. It is no longer the issue. God transcends the chasm that we may by grace share in the divine nature and become by grace what he is by

nature.

The great Incarnation was not something that was complete at the Nativity of Christ (or the Annunciation). Christ became incarnate in his own person that he might be incarnate in our persons as well. Word became flesh that flesh become Word. And Incarnation reaches its proper stature when it unfolds into our divinized life, when the Feast of the Nativity unfurls and Christ is born in us. The Annunciation of the Theotokos and the Nativity of Christ are still going on today!

It is a profound error to think of eternal life as something that begins after death. Eternal life is now; the door is open. The same uncreated Light by which Christ was transfigured, so saints have been transfigured, and this is why icons give halos to saints. Paradise is wherever the saints are; and not only canonized saints but in some measure the faithful who are called saints in Scripture.

In theosis, in divinization, in deification, we do not usurp God's place; rather, Christ's headship over us receives its proper place. That means not only that he is our Lord and Master, though he most certainly is, nor "merely" that we owe our very existence to him. Rather, to say that Christ is our head is the same thing as saying that we are Christ's body. As is the Head, so is the body. As is the Christ, so is the Christian. Christ's own blood flows in our veins. The royal, divine lifeblood courses through our veins. Everything in our lives is to be brought under Christ's headship, and by the same token our lives are to be made divine.

There is no hair's breadth of separation between being a follower of Jesus and being another Christ. If you follow Jesus, you are a vessel of his Incarnation, and the Incarnation of Christ is no faroff historical remembrance: it is what you work on today.

The messy circumstances of our lives

"All this is very well," perhaps you may say, "but my life is not so perfect. We do not live in a perfect world."

But these are not words from, or merely for, golden ages. When Christ came, no wonder people were looking for a military Messiah who would free the holy land from Roman domination. *That was a natural enough thing to want!* (And even today, people want someone to save our economy and political situation.) Christ came, as God does, catching people by surprise. People who were living under Third World economic conditions wanted a political savior. Christ came offering something else: *saving people from their sins.*

Perhaps not much has changed. Not everybody likes our world's political and economic situation. We seek a savior: a political savior, an economic savior. And Christ comes to us to save us from our sins.

This salvation is a salvation which we overlook and the salvation that we need. Some people pass on the quotation, "We want God to change our circumstances. God wants something else: to use our circumstances to change us," and the saying is worth repeating. *We want God to change our circumstances. God wants something else: to use our circumstances to change us.*

These messy circumstances, these bad economic conditions, not to mention politics, are what we think need to be cleared away for God to be at work with us. God has a word for us that is alike difficult and liberating: he wants to work with us *in* these circumstances. Even if economics and politics turn worse, he may want to deal with us, and deify us, precisely in the conditions lie furthest from his power.

Christ God the Savior doesn't just deify us who were made

in the image of God. He wants to place everything in our lives under his headship: every sin, every suffering, every tear, death itself. He wants to commandeer every evil, as he has Shanghaied the works of the Devil down from the ages. He is a hard man who gathers where he has never harvested, and he harvests not only righteousness and good works, but sin, evil, and death no less if we will but allow him. All of this is under his headship, and all of this he transforms to be deified. And he does not share our illusions about when he can really get to work.

We imagine well enough that only if something changes, only if we get a job, only if someone else changes can our lives move forward. God works to our good *before* that happens. Our engagement with God happens first, if there is any change to follow, and when we do discover the Kingdom of God which we keep on overlooking in our search for deliverance, *everything changes*. We may get what we want. We may not get what we want. But we do not *need* what we want. Even if we get what we want, we are placed far beyond it. We discover treasure hidden in a field and *everything changes*. And it is sometimes in the hardest trials that God shows the greatest grace and joy. It is like in the poem "Footprints." When we see only one set of footprints, it was then that Christ carried us: and when we see only one set of footprints, it was then that he was most active in our deification.

Deification is the chief end of man; we were made to become by grace what Christ is by nature, and this is the chief end, not for some other people in some golden age, but here and now, in our political and economic condition. The benevolent, severe, and merciful God who provided for us in decades before is the same benevolent, severe, and merciful God who not only wills to provide for us now, but to work our deification. And he wills this, not sometime when we obtain what we want sometime in the future, but here and now. The same God who commandeers our sin and works

such a wonder in us that it is no longer the issue that we injured ourselves, works with our suffering world in such a way that it is no longer the issue if we live in a time of global economic collapse. The same God who has deified men in every age wills our glory today.

The Feast of the Nativity

The Feast of the Nativity (Christmas) has been called "Pascha in winter," and in a very real sense it is. But there is a difference. Pascha was open triumph; Christ the Firstborn of the Dead forever triumphed over death, and the day is coming when Christ will return borne on rank on rank of angel and every knee will bow and every tongue will confess him. But the Nativity was not open triumph; an angel chorus appeared, and only a few knees bowed. It was if anything an invasion in the dead of winter.

But the Feast of the Annunciation, the Feast of the Nativity, and the Feast of Theophany are the same thing, really: they are feasts of the Incarnation, and the Incarnation is forever frustrated in its purpose unless it unfurls in us. We are to be brought under Christ's headship. We are to be deified. We are made for theosis. We are to contemplate God. We are to be vessels of the Incarnation of Christ, and this is for here and for now, not for when we reach some other circumstances.

Preparation for the Feast of the Nativity includes important external observances intended to concretely foster a realization: Each and every one of us has a problem with sin. You need, and I need, to come to a point of wondering if God can work with such a sinner. But when we come to God and confess our sins, he answers not only with mercy, but grace: repenting from sin is greater work than raising the dead. We awaken when we come to realize we are standing in a sewer, and when we least expect God to work with us,

then in particular our deification is alive. Repenting is greater work than raising the dead, for we ourselves rise from the death of sin into the eternal life that has already begun on earth. And when we wonder, not why God has not placed us in some nicer circumstances, but why God has not placed us in much rougher circumstances, that God is at work and Heaven opens.

Repent! Awaken, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light! Arise from your sins to contemplation, to seeing the uncreated Light, to deification, to theosis, to divinization, to transfiguration, to incarnation! Awaken from sin and be illumined by the uncreated Light! Awaken and be a vessel of Christ's Incarnation!

Introduction to the Jesus Prayer

The Jesus Prayer is the gateway to silence, and silence is the language of Heaven. Silence is not the mere absence of sound, any more than beauty is the mere absence of ugliness. The chant of the Orthodox Church is crafted from silence: it articulates the eloquent silence of Heaven. One facet of holiness is a life and a heart that is silent within, that surrenders layer after layer of internal noise, and is simply present to eternity in the here and now that God has given. And silent people carry Paradise with and around them. Indeed Paradise is where God's people are present.

The metronome giving the beat of silence in many saints is the Jesus Prayer. The Jesus Prayer takes different forms, short and long. Among these are:

- Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.
- Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.

- Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.
- Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.
- Lord, have mercy.

A **metronome** is a tool used to teach music. It ticks like a clock, but it can tick quickly or slowly for a song, and it helps people learn how long notes should last and lays a foundation for playing correctly, and then moving on from playing *correctly* to playing *well*.

When a musician plays for real, the metronome is hidden. The audience may not hear it, but it has reached its full depth when the musician follows its rhythm internally. Orthodox *hesychasm*, or silent spiritual stillness, is meant so that the Jesus Prayer always be with us. "Prayer of the heart" is when the Jesus Prayer is sunk deeply enough in our hearts that moves of its own.

There are concrete ways we can pursue this. We can work to say this prayer with each breath: *Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God*, as we breathe in, *have mercy on me, a sinner*, as we breathe out. We can say this prayer aloud, or silently in our mouths, or silently in our hearts. There is something powerful about saying the prayer aloud over and over again, and the other forms are meant to grow out of this foundation. Some people find it helpful to have a prayer rope, saying the prayer as they breathe and holding one bead or knot and then another to keep count. If you buy a prayer rope, the size does not particularly matter. I was given a 200 knot prayer rope but usually wear a simple black 50 knot prayer rope. Other people don't wear the rope on their wrist, but keep it in a pocket and pull it out to pray.

There are many places you can get prayer ropes, including:

- [The Mount Athos shop.](#)
- [Holy Cross Hermitage \(with 100 beads\)](#)
- [Orthodox Byzantine Icons](#), which like the other places sells icons as well as prayer ropes, and in particular sells [good icons at good prices](#).

There is an ancient command, "Let nothing be done without the bishop." The Jesus Prayer is part of the Orthodox Way and is rightly practiced as dovetailing with the sacramental life and community in the Orthodox Church. There is a saying, "As always, ask your priest," and it applies to anything here.

The metronome is made to fade away: it is not for the real performance. But in this regard the Jesus Prayer is more than a metronome: it soaks ever deeper, but it remains. It opens a door to inner spiritual silence, the tradition of hesychasm in the Church, and it offers healing from the spiritual noise we are addicted to. Many of our technologies are practical, but most of them are also used to deliver spiritual noise, a daily fix of poison that keeps us from inner silence. The television, much of leisure spent on the Internet, all draws us precisely because it is laced with the narcotic of spiritual noise.

Another layer of inner silence is a kind of watchfulness that watches over one's inner state, desires, mental images, and thoughts. This is not "thinking about thinking" in the fashion that is popular today, but opening one's nose to the stench of spiritual disease all of us have, whether we recognize and fight it or not. When we meet a diseased thought, of lust or pride, or using others in greed, it helps us if we can see what in the thought is diseased. It is hard enough not to worry, but sometimes if we can observe our worried thoughts and see what is spiritual disease, we might learn the wisdom of "Don't tell me not to worry, nothing I

worry about ever happens!" We might see as with all passionate thoughts that if we break the thought into its parts and see the spiritual disease, suddenly it looks rather groundless. Once we are in our right mind, or rather our right heart, some of our terrifying worries seem rather silly.

[The Sermon on the Mount](#) is among the shortest of the divine owner's manual for human life. It says a lot of difficult things, but it doesn't say how, and hesychasm, the tradition of the Jesus Prayer and inner stillness guarded by watchfulness is how. It tells how not to worry; it tells how not to store up treasures in Heaven; it tells how to come to a point that we recognize anger and lust as tiny seeds so that we may stamp out smouldering rags and perhaps burn ourselves a little, instead of needing heroic efforts to stop a house fire. It tells how to seek a Kingdom of Heaven that is built in our lives out of the stones of the virtues and spiritual discipline. [The Sermon on the Mount](#) hits us flat on our chest and says, "Here is holiness. We don't live it." It is perhaps the best command in history to, "Wake up and smell the coffee!" Hesychasm, with its watchfulness and the Jesus Prayer a rhythm as we breathe, equips us in concrete terms to scale those peaks. Hesychasm is how to till the spiritual ground so that it will bear the fruit that blazes in the [The Sermon on the Mount](#).

You don't strictly need a prayer rope; many have found them helpful, but they are an aid. Without a prayer rope you may still be able to reach the point where the prayer is always an aroma you smell when you breathe. And they cost money; perhaps God's plan for your transfiguration has you spending your money on other things. The rhythm of prayer is a treasure no one is too poor to buy.

If you are Orthodox, why not discuss with your priest how you might step into this rich tradition? If you are not Orthodox, ask if the Orthodox Church can share with you of its treasures. Some priests might have you receive other

treasures first; some might directly offer you guidance in coming to experience freedom from addiction to noise, a freedom that is like the layers of music that come after one first learns how to use a metronome, the rhythm of "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner," increasingly giving the breath of God that we breathe its true and proper stature.

The Kingdom of Heaven appears as the silence of the Jesus Prayer unfurls.

Lesser Icons: Reflections on Faith, Icons, and Art

C.S. Lewis's [The Voyage of the Dawn Treader](#) opens with a chapter called "The Picture in the Bedroom," which begins, "There was a boy called Eustace Clarence Scrubb, and he almost deserved it." Not long into the chapter, we read:

They were in Lucy's room, sitting on the edge of her bed and looking at a picture on the opposite wall. It was the only picture in the house that they liked. Aunt Alberta didn't like it at all (that was why it was put away in a little back room upstairs), but she couldn't get rid of it because it had been a wedding present from someone she did not want to offend.

It was a picture of a ship—a ship sailing straight towards you. Her prow was gilded and shaped like the head of a dragon with a wide-open mouth. She had only one mast and one large, square sail which was a rich purple. The sides of the ship—what you could see of them where the gilded wings of the dragon ended—were green. She had just run up to the top of one glorious

blue wave, and the nearer slope of that wave came down towards you, with streaks and bubbles on it. She was obviously running fast before a gay wind, listing over a little on her port side. (By the way, if you are going to read this story at all, and if you don't know already, you had better get it into your head that the left of a ship when you are looking ahead is *port*, and the right is *starboard*.) All of the sunlight fell on her from that side, and the water on that side was full of greens and purples. On the other, it was darker blue from the shadow of the ship.

"The question is," said Edmund, "whether it doesn't make things worse, *looking* at a Narnian ship when you can't get there."

"Even looking is better than nothing," said Lucy. "And she is such a very Narnian ship."

"Still playing your old game?" said Eustace Clarence, who had been listening outside the door and now came grinning into the room. Last year, when he had been staying with the Pevensies, he had managed to hear them all talking of Narnia and he loved teasing them about it. He thought of course that they were making it all up; and as he was far too stupid to make anything up himself, he did not approve of that.

"You're not wanted here," said Edmund curtly.

"I'm trying to think of a limerick," said Eustace. "Something like this:

Some kids who played games about Narnia
Got gradually balmier and balmier—"

"Well, *Narnia* and *balmier* don't rhyme, to begin with," said Lucy.

"It's an assonance," said Eustace.

"Don't ask him what an assy-thingummy is," said Edmund. "He's only longing to be asked. Say nothing and perhaps he'll go away."

Most boys, on meeting a reception like this, would have either cleared out or flared up. Eustace did neither. He just hung about grinning, and presently began talking again.

"Do you like that picture?" he asked.

"For Heaven's sake don't let him get started about Art and all that," said Edmund hurriedly, but Lucy, who was very truthful, had already said, "Yes, I do. I like it very much."

"It's a rotten picture," said Eustace.

"You won't see it if you step outside," said Edmund.

"Why do you like it?" said Eustace to Lucy.

"Well, for one thing," said Lucy, "I like it because the ship looks as if it were really moving. And the water looks as if it were really wet. And the waves look as if they were really going up and down."

Of course Eustace knew lots of answers to this, but he didn't say anything. The reason was that at that very moment he looked at the waves and saw that they did look very much indeed as if they were going up and down. He had only once been in a ship (and then only so far as the Isle of Wight) and had been horribly seasick. The look of the waves in the picture made him feel sick again. He turned rather green and tried another look. And then all three children were staring with open mouths.

What they were seeing may be hard to believe when you read it in print, but it was almost as hard to believe when you saw it happening. The things in the picture were moving. It didn't look at all like a cinema either; the colours were too real and clean and out-of-doors for that. Down went the prow of the ship into the wave and up went a great shock of spray. And then up went the wave behind her, and her stern and her deck became visible for the first time, and then disappeared as the next wave came to meet her and her bows went up again. At the same moment an exercise book which had been lying beside Edmund on the bed flapped, rose and sailed through the air to the wall behind him, and Lucy felt all her hair whipping round her face as it does on a windy day. And this was a windy day; but the wind was blowing out of the picture towards them. And suddenly with the wind came the noises—the swishing of waves and the slap of water against the ship's sides and the creaking and the overall high steady roar of air and water. But it was the smell, the wild, briny smell, which really convinced Lucy that she was not dreaming.

"Stop it," came Eustace's voice, squeaky with fright and bad temper. "It's some silly trick you two are playing. Stop it. I'll tell Alberta—Ow!"

The other two were much more accustomed to adventures but, just exactly as Eustace Clarence said, "Ow," they both said, "Ow" too. The reason was that a great cold, salt splash had broken right out of the frame and they were breathless from the smack of it, besides being wet through.

"I'll smash the rotten thing," cried Eustace; and then several things happened at the same time. Eustace rushed towards the picture. Edmund, who knew something about magic, sprang after him, warning him to look out and not be a fool. Lucy grabbed at him from the other side and was dragged forward. And by this time either they had grown much smaller or the picture had grown bigger. Eustace jumped to try to pull it off the wall and found himself standing on the frame; in front of him was not glass but real sea, and wind and waves rushing up to the frame as they might to a rock. There was a second of struggling and shouting, and just as they thought they had got their balance a great blue roller surged up round them, swept them off their feet, and drew them down into the sea. Eustace's despairing cry suddenly ended as the water got into his mouth.

I don't know that C.S. Lewis was thinking about icons or Orthodoxy when he wrote this, and I am reluctant to assume that C.S. Lewis was doing what would be convenient for the claims I want to make at icons. Perhaps there are other caveats that should also be made: but the caveats are not the whole truth.

I am not aware of a better image of what an icon is and what an icon does than this passage in Lewis. Michel Quenot's [The Icon: A Window on the Kingdom](#) is excellent and there are probably more out there, but I haven't come across as much of an evocative image as the opening to [The Voyage of the Dawn Treader](#).

I don't mean that the first time you see an icon, you will be swept off your feet. There was a long time where I found them to be clumsy art that was awkward to look at. I needed to warm to them, and appreciate something that works very differently from Western art. I know that other people have had these immediate piercing experiences with icons, but appreciating icons has been a process of coming alive for me. But much the same could be said of my learning French or Greek, where I had to struggle at first and then slowly began to appreciate what is there. This isn't something Orthodoxy has a complete monopoly on; some of the time Roman Catholic piety can have something much in the same vein. But even if it's hard to say that there's something in icons that is nowhere else, there is something in icons that I had to learn to appreciate.

A cradle Orthodox believer at my parish explained that when she looks at an icon of the Transfiguration, she is there. The Orthodox understanding of presence and memory is not Western and not just concerned with neurons firing in the brain; it means that icons are portals that bring the spiritual presence of the saint or archetypal event that they portray. An icon can be alive, some more than others, and some people can sense this spiritually.

Icons are called windows of Heaven. Fundamental to icon and to symbol is that when the Orthodox Church proclaims that we are the image of God, it doesn't mean that we are a sort of detached miniature copy of God. It doesn't mean that we are a detached *anything*. It is a claim that to be human is to be in relation to God. It is a claim that we

manifest God's presence and that the breath we breathe is the breath of God. What this means for icons is that when the cradle Orthodox woman I just mentioned says that she is there at the Transfiguration, then that icon is like the picture of the Narnian ship. If we ask her, "Where are you?" then saying "Staring at painted wood" is like saying that someone is "talking to an electronic device" when that person is using a cell phone to talk with a friend. In fact the error is deeper.

An icon of a saint is not intended to inform the viewer what a saint looked like. Its purpose is to connect the viewer with Christ, or Mary the Theotokos, or one of the saints or a moment we commemorate, like the Annunciation when Gabriel told humble Mary that she would bear God, or the Transfiguration, when for a moment Heaven shone through and Christ shone as Christians will shine and as saints sometimes shine even in this life. I don't know all of the details of how the art is put together—although it *is* art—but the perspective lines vanish not in the depths of the picture but behind the viewer because the viewer is part of the picture. The viewer is invited to cross himself, bow before, and kiss the icon in veneration: the rule is not "Look, but don't touch." any more than the rule in our father's house is "Look, but don't touch." The gold background is there because it is the metal of light; these windows of Heaven are not simply for people to look into them and see the saint radiant with Heaven's light, but Heaven looks in and sees us. When I approach icons I have less the sense that I am looking at these saints, and Heaven, than that they are looking at me. The icon's purpose is not, as C.S. Lewis's picture, to connect people with Narnia, but to draw people into Heaven, which in the Orthodox understanding must begin in this life. It is less theatrical, but in the end the icon offers something that the Narnian picture does not.

It is with this theological mindset that Bishop KALLISTOS Ware is fond, in his lectures, of holding up a photograph of

something *obviously* secular—such as a traffic intersection—and saying, "In Greece, this is an icon. It's not a holy icon, but it's an icon."

That, I believe, provides as good a departure as any for an Orthodox view of art. I would never say that icons are inferior art, and I would be extremely hesitant to say that art is equal to icons. But they're connected. Perhaps artwork is lesser icons. Perhaps it is indistinct icons. But art is connected to iconography, and even if that link is severed so that art becomes non-iconic, it dies.

Another illustration may shed light on the relation between iconography and other art. The Eucharist is the body and blood of Christ to Orthodox. It is not simply a sacrament, but the sacrament of sacraments, and the sacrament which all other sacraments are related. And there are ways the Orthodox Church requires that this Holy Communion be respected: it is to be prepared for with prayer and fasting, and under normal circumstances it is only received by people who are of one mind as the early Church. It encompasses, inseparably, mystic communion with God and communion with the full brothers and sisters of the Orthodox Church.

How does an ordinary meal around a table with family compare? In one sense, it doesn't. But to say that and stop is to miss something fundamental. Eating a meal around a table with friends and family is communion. It is not Holy Communion, but it is communion.

A shared meal is a rite that is part of the human heritage. It persists across times, cultures, and religions. This is recognized more clearly in some cultures than others, but i.e. Orthodox Jewish culture says that to break bread is only something you do when you are willing to become real friends. The term "breaking of bread" in the New Testament carries a double meaning; it can mean either the Eucharist or a common meal. A common meal may not have Orthodox

making the same astounding claims we make about the Eucharist, but it is a real communion. This may be why a theologian made repeatedly singled out the common meal in the Saint Vladimir's Seminary Education Day publication to answer questions of what we should do today when technology is changing our lives, sometimes for the better but quite often not. I myself have not made that effort much, and I can say that there is a difference between merely eating and filling my animal needs, and engaging in the precious ritual, the real communion, of a common meal around a table.

If we compare a common meal with the Eucharist, it seems very small. But if we look at a common meal and the community and communion around that meal (*common*, *community*, and *communion* all being words that are related to each other and stem from the same root), next to merely eating to serve our animal needs, then all of the sudden we see things that can be missed if we only look at what separates the Eucharist from lesser communions. A common meal is communion. It is not Holy Communion, but it *is* communion.

In the same sense, art is not the equal of sacred iconography. My best art, even my best religious art, does not merit the treatment of holy icons. But neither is art, or at least good art, a separate sort of thing from iconography, and if that divorce is ever effected (it has been, but I'll wait on that for how), then it generates from being art as a meal that merely fills animal, bodily needs without being communion degenerates from what a common meal should be. And in that sense I would assert that art is lesser iconography. And the word "lesser" should be given less weight than "iconography." I may not create holy icons, but I work to create icons in all of my art, from writing to painting to other creations.

In my American culture—this may be different in other

areas of the world, even if American culture has a strong influence—there are two great obstacles to connecting with art. These obstacles to understanding need to be denounced. These two obstacles can be concisely described as:

- The typical secular approach to art.
- The typical Christian approach to art.

If I'm going to denounce those two, it's not clear how much wiggle room I am left over to affirm—and my goal is not merely to affirm but embrace an understanding of art. Let me begin to explain myself.

Let's start with a red flag that provides just a glimpse of the mainstream Christian view of art. In college, when I thought it was cool to be a cynic and use my mind to uncover a host of hidden evils, I defined "Christian Contemporary Music" in [Hayward's Unabridged Dictionary](#) to be "A genre of song designed primarily to impart sound teaching, such as the doctrine that we are sanctified by faith and not by good taste in music."

May God be praised, that was not the whole truth in Christian art then, and it is even further from being the whole truth today—I heartily applaud the "Wow!" music videos, and there is a rich stream of exceptions. But this doesn't change the fact that the #1 selling Christian series today is the *Left Behind* series, which with apologies to Dorothy Parker, does not have a *single* book that is to be set aside lightly. (They are all to be hurled with great force!)

If I want to explain what I would object to instead of simply making incendiary remarks about Christian arts, let me give a concrete example. I would like to discuss something that I discussed with a filmmaker at a Mennonite convention a couple of years I converted to Orthodoxy. I did not set out to criticize, and I kept my mouth shut about certain things.

What I did do was to outline a film idea for a film that

would start out indistinguishably from an action-adventure movie. It would have one of the hero's friends held captive by some cardboard-cutout villains. There is a big operation to sneak in and deftly rescue him, and when that fails, all Hell breaks loose and there is a terrific action-adventure style firefight. There is a dramatic buildup to the hero getting in the helicopter, and as they are leaving, one of the villain's henchmen comes running with a shotgun. Before he can aim, the hero blasts away his knee with a hollow-nosed .45.

The camera surprisingly does not follow the helicopter in its rush to glory, but instead focuses on the henchman for five or ten excruciating minutes as he curses and writhes in agony. Then the film slows down to explore what that one single gunshot means to the henchman for the remaining forty years of his life, as he nursed a spiritual wound of lust for vengeance that was infinitely more tragic than his devastating physical wound.

The filmmaker liked the idea, or at least that's what he thought. He saw a different and better ending than what I envisioned. It would be the tale of the henchman's journey of forgiveness, building to a dramatic scene where he is capable of killing the hero and beautifully lets go of revenge. And as much as I believe in forgiveness and letting go of revenge, this "happy ending" (roughly speaking) bespoke an incommensurable gulf between us.

The difference amounts to a difference of love. Not that art has to cram in as much love, or message about love or forgiveness, as it can. If that happens, it is fundamentally a failure on the part of the artist, and more specifically it is a failure of a creator to have proper love for his creation. My story would not show much love in action, and it is specifically meant to leave audiences not only disturbed but shell shocked and (perhaps) sickened at how violence is typically shown by Hollywood. The heartblood of cinematic

craft in this film would be an effort to take a character who in a normal action-adventure movie is faceless, and which the movie takes pains to prevent us from seeing or loving as human when he is torn up by the hero's cool weapon, and give him a human face so that the audience feels the pain not only of his wounded body but the grievous spiritual wound that creates its deepest tragedy. That is to say that the heartblood of cinematic craft would be to look lovingly at a man, unloving as he may be, and give him a face instead of letting him be a faceless henchman whose only purpose is to provide conflict so we can enjoy him being slaughtered. And more to the point, it would not violate his freedom or his character by giving him a healing he would despise, and announce that after his knee has been blasted away he comes to the point of forgiving the man who killed his friends and crippled him for life.

Which is to say that I saw the film as art, and he saw it as a container he could cram more message into. That is why I was disturbed when he wanted to tack a happy ending on. There is a much bigger problem here than ending a story the wrong way.

I don't mean to say that art shouldn't say anything, or that it is a sin to have a moral. This film idea is not only a story that has a moral somewhere; its entire force is driven by the desire to give a face, a human face, to faceless villains whose suffering and destruction is something we rejoice in other words. In other words, it has a big moral, it doesn't mince words, and it makes absolutely no apologies for being driven by its moral.

Then what's the difference? It amounts to love. In the version of the story I created, the people, including the henchmen, are people. What the filmmaker saw was a question of whether there's a better way to use tools to drive home message. And he made the henchman be loving enough to forgive by failing to love him enough.

When I was talking with one professor at Wheaton about how I was extremely disappointed with a Franklin Peretti novel despite seeing how well the plot fit together, I said that I couldn't put my finger on what it was. He rather bluntly interrupted me and simply said that Peretti didn't love his characters. And he is right. In *This Present Darkness*, Franklin Peretti makes a carefully calculated use of tools at his disposal (such as characters) to provide maximum effect in driving home his point. He does that better than art does. But he does not love his characters into being; he does not breathe into them and let them move. It's not a failure of technique; it's a failure of something much deeper. In this sense, the difference between good and bad art, between [A Wind in the Door](#) and *Left Behind*, is that in [A Wind in the Door](#) there are characters who not only have been loved into being but have a spark of life that has been not only created into them but loved into them, and in *Left Behind* there are tools which are used to drive home "message" but are not in the same sense *loved*.

There is an obvious objection which I would like to pause to consider: "Well, I understand that elevated, smart people like you can appreciate high art, and that's probably better. But can't we be practical and look at popular art that will reach ordinary people?" My response to that is, "Are you sure? Are you *really* sure of what you're assuming?"

Perhaps I am putting my point too strongly, but let me ask the last time you saw someone who wasn't Christian and not religious listening to Amy Grant-style music, or watching the *Left Behind* movie? *If it is relevant, is it reaching non-Christians?* (And isn't that what "relevant" stuff is supposed to do?) The impression I've gotten, the strong impression, is that the only people who find that art relevant to their lives are Evangelicals who are trying to be relevant. But isn't the world being anti-Christian? My answer to that is that people who watch *The Chronicles of Narnia* and people who watch *Star Wars* movies are largely watching them for the same

reason: they are good art. The heavy Christian force behind *The Chronicles of Narnia*, which Disney to its credit did not edit out, has not driven away enough people to stop the film from being a major success. *The Chronicles of Narnia* is relevant, and it is relevant not because people calculated how to cram in the most message, but because not only C.S. Lewis but the people making the film loved their creation. Now, there are other factors; both *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *Star Wars* have commercial tie-in's. And there is more commercial muscle behind those two than the *Left Behind* movie. But to only observe these things is to miss the point. The stories I hear about the girl who played Lucy walking onto the set and being so excited she couldn't stop her hands from shaking, are not stories of an opportunistic actress who found a way to get the paycheck she wanted. They are stories of people who loved what they were working on. *That* is what makes art powerful, not budget.

There's something I'd like to say about love and work. There are some jobs—maybe all—that you really can't do unless you really love them. How? Speaking as a programmer, there's a *lot* of stress and aggravation in this job. Even if you have no difficulties with your boss, or co-workers, the computer has a sort of perverse parody of intelligence that means that you do your best to do something clearly, and the computer does the strangest things.

It might crash; it might eat your work; it might crash and eat your work; it might show something weird that plays a perverted game of hide and seek and always dodge your efforts to find out what exactly is going wrong so you can fix it. Novices' blood is boiling before they manage to figure out basic errors that won't even let you run your program at all. So programmers will be fond of definitions of "Programming, n. A hobby similar to banging your head against a wall, but with fewer opportunities for reward."

Let me ask: What is programming like if you do not love it?

There are many people who love programming. They don't get there unless they go through the stress and aggravation. There's enough stress and aggravation that you can't be a good programmer, and maybe you can't be a programmer at all, unless you love it.

I've made remarks about programming; there are similar remarks to be made about carpentry, or being a mother (even if being a mother is a bigger kind of thing than programming or carpentry). This is something that is true of art—with its stress and aggravation—precisely because art is work, and work can have stress and aggravation that become unbearable if there is no love. Or, in many cases, you can work, but your work suffers. Love may need to get dirty and do a lot of grimy work—you can't love something into being simply by feeling something, even if love can sometimes transfigure the grimy work—but there absolutely *must* be love behind the workgloves. It doesn't take psychic powers to tell if something was made with love.

I would agree with Franky Schaeffer's remark in [Addicted to Mediocrity: 20th Century Christians and the Arts](#), when he pauses to address the question "How can I as a Christian support the arts?" the first thing he says is to avoid Christian art. I would temper that remark now, as some Christian art has gotten a lot better. But he encouraged people to patronize good art, and to the question, "How can I afford to buy original paintings?" he suggests that a painting costs much less than a TV. But Schaeffer should be set aside another work which influenced his father, and which suggests that if Christian art is problematic, that doesn't mean that secular art is doing everything well.

When I was preparing for a job interview with an auction house that deals with coins and stamps, I looked through the 2003(?) *Spink's Catalogue of British Coins*. (Mainly I studied the pictures of coins to see what I could learn.) When I did that, a disturbing story unfolded.

The Spink's catalogue takes coins from Celtic and Roman times through medieval times right up through the present day. While there are exceptions in other parts of the world, the ancient and early medieval coins all had simple figures that were not portraits, in much the way that a drawing in a comic strip like [Foxytrot](#) differs from Mark Trail or some other comic strip where the author is trying to emulate a photograph. Then, rather suddenly, something changes, and people start cramming in as much detail as they could. The detail reaches a peak in the so-called "gold penny", in which there is not a square millimeter of blank space, and then things settle down as people realize that it's not a sin to have blank space as well as a detailed portrait. (On both contemporary British and U.S. coinage, the face of the coin has a bas-relief portrait of a person, and then there is a blank space, and a partial ring of text around the edge, with a couple more details such as the year of coinage. The portrait may be detailed, but the coinmakers are perfectly willing to leave blank space in without cramming in more detail than fits their design. In the other world coinage I've seen, there can be some differences in the portrait (it may be of an animal), but there is a similar use of portrait, text, and blank space.

This is what happened when people's understanding of symbol disintegrated. The effort to cram in detail which became an effort to be photorealistic is precisely an effort to cram some reality into coins when they lost their reality as symbols. There are things about coins then that even numismatists (people who study coins) do not often understand today. In the Bible, the backdrop to the question in Luke 20 that Jesus answered, "Show me a coin. Whose likeness is it, and whose inscription? ... Give what is Caesar's to Caesar, and what is God's to God," is on the surface a question about taxes but is not a modern gripe about "Must I pay my hard-earned money to the Infernal Revenue Service?", It is not the question some Anabaptists

ask today about whether it is OK for Christians' taxes to support things they believe are unconscionable, and lead one pastor to suggest that people earn less money so they will pay less taxes that will end up supporting violence. It's not a question about anything most Christians would recognize in money today.

It so happens that in traditional fashion quarters in the U.S. today have a picture of George Washington, which is to say not only a picture but an authority figure. There is no real cultural reason today why this tradition has to be maintained. If the government mint started turning out coins with a geometric design, a blank surface, or some motto or trivia snippet, there would be no real backlash and people would buy and sell with the new quarters as well as the traditional ones. The fact that the quarter, like all commonly circulated coins before the dollar coin, has the image of not simply a-man-instead-of-a-woman but specifically the man who once held supreme political authority within the U.S., is a quaint tradition that has lost its meaning and is now little more than a habit. But it has been otherwise.

The Roman denarius was an idol in the eyes of many Jewish rabbis. It was stamped with the imprint of the Roman emperor, which is to say that it was stamped with the imprint of a pagan god and was therefore an idol. And good Jews shouldn't have had a denarius with them when they asked Jesus that trapped question. For them to have a denarius with them was worse on some accounts than if Jesus asked them, "Show me a slab of bacon," and they had one with them. The Jewish question of conscience is "Must one pay tax with an idol?" and the question had nothing to do with any economic hardship involved in paying that tax (even though most Jews then were quite poor).

Jesus appealed to another principle. The coin had Caesar's image and inscription: this was the one thing he asked them

to tell him besides producing the coin. In the ancient world people took as axiomatic that the authority who produced coinage had the authority to tax that coinage, and Jesus used that as a lever: "Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God's the thing that are God's."

This last bit of leverage was used to make a much deeper point. The implication is that if a coin has Caesar's image and we owe it to Caesar, what has God's image—*you and I*—are God's and are owed to God. This image means something deep. If it turns out that we owe a tax to Caesar, how much more do we owe our very selves to God?

Augustine uses the image of "God's coins" to describe us. He develops it further. In the ancient world, when coins were often made of precious and soft metals instead of the much harder coins today, coins could be "defaced" by much use: they would be rubbed down so far that the image on the coin would be worn away. Then defaced coins, which had lost their image, could be restruck. Augustine not only claims that we are owed to God; he claims that the image in us can be defaced by sin, and then restruck with a new image by grace. This isn't his whole theology for sin and grace, but it says something significant about what coins meant not just to him but to his audience.

During the Iconoclastic Controversy, not only in the East but before the overcrowded "gold penny", one monk, who believed in showing reverence to icons, was brought before the emperor, who was trying to suppress reverence to icons. The emperor asked the monk, "Don't you know that you can walk on an icon of Christ without showing disrespect to him?" and the monk asked if he could walk on "your face", meaning "your face as present in this coin," without showing the emperor disrespect. He threw down a coin, and started to walk on it. The emperor's guards caught him in the act, and he was brutally assaulted.

These varying snapshots of coins before a certain period in

the West are snapshots of coins that are icons. They aren't holy icons, but they are understood as icons before people's understanding of icons disintegrated.

When I explained this to one friend, he said that he had said almost exactly the same thing when observing the development or anti-development of Western art. The story I was told of Western art, at least until a couple of centuries ago, was a story of progress from cruder and more chaotic art. Medieval art was sloppy, and when perspective came along, it was improved and made clearer. But this has a very different light if you understood the older art's reality as symbol. In [A Glimpse of Eastern Orthodoxy](#), I wrote:

Good Orthodox icons don't even pretend to be photorealistic, but this is not simply because Orthodox iconography has failed to learn from Western perspective. As it turns out, Orthodox icons use a reverse perspective that is designed to include the viewer in the picture. Someone who has become a part of the tradition is drawn into the picture, and in that sense an icon is like a door, even if it's more common to call icons "windows of Heaven." But it's not helpful to simply say "Icons don't use Renaissance perspective, but reverse perspective that includes the viewer," because even if the reverse perspective is there, reverse perspective is simply not the point. There are some iconographers who are excellent artists, and artistry does matter, but the point of an icon is to have something more than artistry, as much as the point of visiting a friend is more than seeing the scenery along the way, even if the scenery is quite beautiful and adds to the pleasure of a visit. Cramming in photorealism is a way of making more involved excursions and dredging up more exotic or historic or whatever destinations that go well

beyond a scenic route, after you have lost the ability to visit a friend. The Western claim is "Look at how much more extravagant and novel my trip are than driving along the same roads to see a friend!"—and the Orthodox response shows a different set of priorities: "Look how lonely you are now that you no longer visit friends!"

Photorealistic perspective is not new life but an extravagance once symbol has decayed. That may be one problem, or one thing that I think is a problem. But in the centuries after perspective, something else began to shift.

When Renaissance artists experimented with more photorealistic perspective, maybe they can be criticized, but they were experimenting to communicate better. Perspective was a tool to communicate better. Light and shadow were used to communicate better. It's a closer call with impressionism, but there is a strong argument that their departure from tradition and even photorealism was to better communicate how the outsides of things looked in different lighting conditions and at different times of day. But then something dreadful happened: not only artists but the community of people studying art learned a lesson from history. They learned that the greatest art, from the Renaissance onwards, experimented with tradition and could decisively break from tradition. They did not learn that this was always to improve communicate with the rest of us. And so what art tried to do was break from tradition, whether or not this meant communicating better to "the rest of us".

Some brave souls go to modern art museums, and look at paintings that look nothing like anything they can connect with, and walk away humbled, thinking that they're stupid, or not good enough to appreciate the "elevated" art that better people are able to connect with. There's something to

be said for learning to appreciate art, but with most of these people the problem is *not* that they're not "elevated" enough. The problem is that the art is not trying to communicate with the world as a whole. Innovation is no longer to better communicate; innovation at times sneers at communication in a fashion people can recognize.

The Franky Schaeffer title I gave earlier was [Addicted to Mediocrity: 20th Century Christians and the Arts](#); the title I did not give is [Modern Art and the Death of a Culture](#), which has disturbing lettering and a picture of a man screaming on its cover art. If there is a deep problem with the typical Christian approach to arts (and it is *not* a universal rule), there is a deep problem with the typical secular Western approach to arts (even if that is *not* a universal rule either). A painting like "The Oaths of the Horatii" is no more intended to be a private remark among a few elite souls than [Calvin and Hobbes](#); [Calvin and Hobbes](#) may attract the kind of people who like other good art, but this is never because, as Calvin tells Hobbes about his snowman art which he wants lowbrows to have to subsidize, "I'm trying to criticize the lowbrows who can't appreciate this."

The concept of an artist is also deeply problematic. When I was taking an art history class at Wheaton, the professor asked people a question about their idea of an artist, and my reaction was, "I don't have any preconceptions." Then he started talking, and I realized that I did have preconceptions about the matter.

If we look at the word "genius" across the centuries, it has changed. Originally your "genius" was your guardian angel, more or less; it wasn't connected with great art. Then it became a muse that inspired art and literature from the outside. Then "genius" referred to artistic and literary giftedness, and as the last step in the process of internalization, "genius" came to refer to the author or artist

himself.

The concepts of the artist and the genius are not the same, but they have crossed paths, and their interaction is significant. Partly from other sources, some artists take flak today because they lead morally straight lives. Why is this? Well, given the kind of superior creature an artist is supposed to be, it's unworthy of an artist to act as if they were bound by the moral codes that the common herd can't get rid of. The figure of the artist is put up on a pedestal that reaches higher than human stature; like other figures, the artist is expected to have an enlightened vision about how to reform society, and be a vanguard who is above certain rules.

That understanding of artists has to come down in the Christian community. Artists have a valuable contribution; when St. Paul is discussing the Spirit's power in the Church, he writes (I Cor 12:7-30, RSV):

To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body — Jews or Greeks, slaves or free — and all were made to

drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single organ, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?

I would suggest that the secular idea of an artisan is closer to an Orthodox understanding of an artist than the secular idea of artist itself. Even if an artisan is not thought of in terms of being a member of a body, the idea of an artisan is one that people can accept being one member of an organism in which all are needed.

An artisan can show loving craftsmanship, can show a personal touch, can have a creative spark, and should be seen as pursuing honorable work; however, the idea of an artisan carries less bad freight than the idea of an artist. They're also not too far apart: in the Middle Ages, the sculptors who worked on cathedrals were closer to what we would consider artisans who produced sculptures than being seen as today's artists. Art is or should be connected to iconography; it should also be connected to the artisan's craft, and people are more likely to give an artisan a place as a contributing member who is part of a community than artists.

If we look at technical documentation, then there are a number of believable compliments you could give if you bumped into the author. It would be believable to say that the documentation was a helpful reference met your need; that it was clear, concise, and well-written; or that it let you find exactly what you needed and get back to work. But it would sound odd to say that the technical writer had very distinctive insights, and even odder to say that you liked the author's personal self-expression about what the technology could do. Technical writing is not glorified self-expression, and if we venerate art that is glorified self-expression, then maybe we have something to learn from how we treat technical writing.

If this essay seems like a collection of distinctive (or less politely, idiosyncratic) personal insights I had, or my own personal self-expression in Orthodoxy, theology, and faith, then that is a red flag. It falls short of the mark of what art,

or Orthodox writing, should be. (And it is intended as art: maybe it's minor art, but it's meant as art.) It's not just that most or all of the insights owe a debt to people who have gone before me, and I may have collated but contributed nothing to the best insights, serving much more to paraphrase than think things up from scratch. Michel Quenot's [The Icon: A Window on the Kingdom](#), and, for much longer, Madeleine l'Engle's [Walking on Water: Reflections on Faith and Art](#) have both given me a grounding. But even aside from that, art has existed for long before me and will exist for long after me, and I am not the sole creator of an Orthodox or Christian approach to the arts any more than a technical writer has trailblazed a particular technique of creating such-and-such type of business report. Good art is freedom and does bear its human creator's fingerprints. Even iconography, with its traditional canons, gives substantial areas of freedom to the iconographer and never specify each detail. Part of being an iconographer is using that freedom well. However, if this essay is simply self-expression, that is a defect, not a merit. As an artist and writer, I am trying to offer more than glorified self-expression.

This Sunday after liturgy, people listened to a lecture taped from Bp. KALLISTOS Ware. He talked about the great encounter at the burning bush, when God revealed himself to Moses by giving his name. At the beginning of the encounter, Moses was told, "Take off your shoes, for the place you are standing is holy ground." Bp. KALLISTOS went on to talk about how in those days, as of the days of the Fathers, people's shoes were something dead, something made from leather. The Fathers talked about this passage as meaning by implication that we should take off our dead familiarity to be able to encounter God freshly.

I was surprised, because I had reinvented that removal of familiarity, and I had no idea it was a teaching of the Orthodox Church. Perhaps my approach to trying to see

past the deadness of familiarity—which you can see in [Game Review: Meatspace](#)—was not exactly the same as what Bp. KALLISTOS was saying to begin a discussion about receiving Holy Communion properly. Yet I found out that something I could think of as my own private invention was in fact a rediscovery. I had reinvented one of the treasures of Orthodoxy. Part of Orthodoxy is surrender, and that acknowledgment that anything and everything we hold, no matter how dear, must be offered to God's Lordship for him to do with as we please. Orthodoxy is inescapably a slow road of pain and loss. But there is another truth, that things we think are a private heresy (I am thinking of G.K. Chesterton's discussion) are in fact a reinvention, perhaps a crude reinvention, of an Orthodox treasure and perhaps an Orthodox treasure which meets its best footing, deepest meaning, and fullest expression when that jewel is set in its Orthodox bezel.

There are times when I've wanted to be an iconographer (in the usual sense). I don't know if that grace will ever be granted me, but there was one point when I had access to an icon painting class. When I came to it and realized what was going on, I shied away. Perhaps I wanted to learn to write icons (Orthodox speak of writing icons rather than painting them), but there was something I wasn't comfortable with.

Parishes have, or at least should have, a meal together after worship, even if people think of it as "coffee hour" instead of thinking of it as the communion of a common meal. The purpose is less to distribute coffee, which coffee drinkers have enough of in their homes, than to provide an opportunity (perhaps with a social lubricant) for people to meet and talk. That meeting and talking is beautiful. Furthermore, a parish may have various events when people paint, seasonally decorate, or maintain the premises, and in my experience there can be, and perhaps should be, an air of lighthearted social gathering about it all.

But this iconography class had lots of chatter, where people gathered and learned the skill of icon painting that began and ended with a prayer but in between had the atmosphere of a casual secular gathering that didn't involve any particularly spiritual endeavor or skill. Now setting my personal opinions aside, the classical canons require that icons be written in prayer, concentration, and quiet. There are reasons for this, and I reacted as I did, not so much because I had heard people were breaking such-and-such ancient rule, but more because I was affronted by something that broke the rule's spirit even more than its letter, and I sensed that there was something askew. The reason is that icons are written in silence is that you cannot make a healthy, full, and spiritual icon simply by the motions of your body. An icon is first and foremost created through the iconographer's spirit to write what priests and canons have defined, and although the iconographer is the copyist or implementor and not original author, we believe that the icon is written by the soul of the iconographer—if you understand it as a particular (secular) painting technique, you don't understand it. That class, like that iconographer, have produced some of the dreariest and most opaque icons, or "windows of Heaven", that I have seen. I didn't join that class because however much I wanted to be an iconographer, I didn't want to become an iconographer like that, and in the Orthodox tradition you become an iconographer by becoming a specific iconographer's disciple and becoming steeped in that iconographer's spiritual characteristics.

Years ago, I stopped watching television, or at least started making a conscious effort to avoid it. I like and furthermore love music, but I don't put something on in the background. And, even though I love the world wide web, I observe careful limits, and not just because (as many warn) it is easy to get into porn. The web can be used to provide "noise" to keep us from coming face to face with the silence. The web

(substitute

"television"<http://CJSHayward.com/>"title="Jonathan's Corner → Orthodox Books Online, and More"music"<http://CJSHayward.com/>"title="Jonathan's Corner → Orthodox Books Online, and

More"newspapers"<http://CJSHayward.com/>"title="Jonathan's Corner → Orthodox Books Online, and

More"movies"<http://CJSHayward.com/>for that matter,

"Church Fathers" for how this temptation appears to you) can be used to anesthetize the boredom that comes when we face silence, and keep us from ever coming to the place on the other side of boredom. When I have made decisions about television, I wasn't thinking, on conscious terms, about being more moral and spiritual by so doing. I believe that television is a pack of cigarettes for the heart and mind, and I have found that I can be creative in more interesting ways, and live better, when I am cautious about the amount of noise in my life, even if you don't have to be the strictest "quiet person" in the world to reap benefits. Quiet is one spiritual discipline of the Orthodox Church (if perhaps a lesser spiritual discipline), and the spiritual atmosphere I pursued is a reinvention, perhaps lesser and incomplete, of something the Orthodox Church wants her iconographers to profitably live. There is a deep enough connection between icons and other art that it's relevant to her artists.

When I write what I would never call (or wish to call) my best work, I have the freedom to be arbitrary. If I'm writing something of no value, I can impose my will however I want. I can decide what I want to include and what I want to exclude, what I am going to go into detail about what I don't want to elaborate on, and what analogies I want to draw. It can be as much dictated by "Me! Me! Me!" as I want. When I am creating something I value, however, that version of freedom hardly applies. I am not free, if I am going to create fiction that will resonate and ring true, to steamroll over my characters' wishes. If I do I diminish my creation. What I

am doing is loving and serving my creations. I can't say that I never act on selfish reasons, but if I am doing anything of a good job my focus is on loving my creation into being and taking care of what it needs, which is simultaneously a process of wrestling with it, and listening to it with the goal of getting myself out of the way so I can shape it as it needs to be shaped.

There is a relationship that places the artist as head and lord of his creation, but if we reach for some of the most readily available ideas of headship and lordship, that claim makes an awful lot of confusion. Until I began preparing to write this essay, it didn't even occur to me to look at the human creator-creation connection in terms of headship or lordship. I saw a place where I let go of arbitrary authority and any insistence on my freedoms to love my creation, to listen to and then serve it, and care for all the little details involved in creating it (and, in my case, publishing it on the web). All of this describes the very heart of how Christians are to understand headship, and my attitude is hardly unique: Christian artists who do not think consciously about headship at all create out of the core of the headship relation. They give their works not just any kind of love, but the particular and specific love which a head has for a body. If art ends by bearing the artist's fingerprints, this should not be because the artist has decided, "My art must tell of my glory," but because loved art, art that has been served and developed and educed and drawn into manifest being, cannot but be the image, and bear the imprint, of its creator. That is how art responds to its head and lord.

To return to spiritual discipline: Spiritual discipline is the safeguard and the shadow of love. This applies first and foremost to the Orthodox Way as a whole, but also specifically to art. Quiet is a lesser discipline, and may not make the front page. Fasting from certain foods can have value, but it is only good if saying no to yourself in food prepares you to love other people even when it means

saying no to yourself. There are harsh warnings about people who fast and look down on others who are less careful about fasting or don't fast at all and judging them as "less spiritual". Perhaps fasting can have great value, but it is better not to fast than to fast and look down.

Prayer is the flagship, the core, and the crowning jewel of spiritual discipline. The deepest love for our neighbor made in God's image is to pray and act out of that prayer. Prayer may be enriched when it is connected with other spiritual disciplines, but the goal of spiritual discipline and the central discipline in creating art is prayer.

There is a passage in George MacDonald where a little girl stands before an old man and looks around an exquisite mansion in wonder. After a while the old man asks her, "Are you done saying your prayers?" The surprised child responds, "I wasn't saying my prayers." The old man said, "Yes you were. You just didn't realize it."

If I say that prayer drives art, I don't just mean that I say little prayers as I create art (although that should be true). I mean that when I am doing my best work, part of why it is my best work is that the process itself is an act of prayer. However many arbitrary freedoms I would not dare to exercise and deface my own creation, I am at my freest and most alive when I am listening to God and a creation about how to love it into being. It is not the same contemplation as the Divine Liturgy, but it is connected, part of the same organism. The freedom I taste when I create, the freedom of service and the freedom of love, is freedom at so deep a level that a merely arbitrary freedom to manipulate or make dictatorial insinuations on a creation pales in comparison to the freedom to listen and do a thousand services to art that is waiting for me to create it.

"He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen." (I Jn 4:20, RSV). If an artist does not love God and the neighbors whom he can

see and who manifest the glory of the invisible God, he is in a terrible position to healthily love a creation which—at the moment, exists in God's mind and partially in its human creator, but nowhere else. This is another way of saying that character matters. I have mentioned some off-the-beaten-track glimpses of spiritual discipline; this leaves out more obvious and important aspects of love like honesty and chastity. The character of an artist who can love his works into being should be an overflow of a Christian life of love. Not to say that you must be an artist to love! Goodness is many-sided. This is true of what Paul wrote (quoted above) about the eye, hand, and foot all belonging to the body. Paul also wrote the scintillating words (I Cor 15:35-49, RSV):

But some one will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" You foolish man! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. For not all flesh is alike, but there is one kind for men, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are celestial bodies and there are terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory.

So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is

also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual which is first but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.

These are words of resurrection, but the promise of the glorious and incorruptible resurrection body hinge on words where "star differs from star in glory". An artist's love is the glory of one star. It is no more the only star than the eye is the only part of the body. It is part of a scintillating spectrum—but not the whole spectrum itself!

I would like to also pause to respond to an objection which careful scholars would raise, and which some devout Orthodox would sense even if they might not put it in words. I have fairly uncritically used a typically Western conception of art. I have lumped together visual arts, literature, music, film, etc. and seem to assume that showing something in one case applied to every case. I would acknowledge that a more careful treatment would pay attention to their differences, and that some stick out more than others.

I am not sure that a better treatment would criticize this assumption. However, let's look at one distinctive of Orthodoxy. One thinks of why Western Christians talk about how the superficial legend goes that the leaders of (what would become) Russia went religion-shopping, and they saw that the Orthodox worship looked impressive, and instead of deciding based on a good reason, they went with the worship they liked best. Eastern Christians tend to agree

about the details of what people believe happened, but we do not believe the aesthetic judgments were something superficial that wasn't a good reason. We believe that something of Heaven shone through, and if that affected the decision, people weren't making a superficial decision but something connected with Truth and the Light of Heaven and of God. We believe that worship, and houses of worship, are to be beautiful and reflect not only the love but the Light and beauty of Heaven, and a beautiful house of worship is no more superfluous to light than good manners are superfluous to love. The "beauty connection" has not meant that we have to choose between good homilies, music, liturgy, and icons. A proper Orthodox listing of what constituted real, iconic art may differ from a Western listing, and there's more than being sticks in the mud behind the fact that Orthodox Churches, by and large, do not project lyrics with PowerPoint. Part of what I have said about icons is crystallized in a goal of "transparency", that the goal of a window of Heaven is to be transparent to Heaven's light and love. Not just icons can be, or fail to be, transparent. Liturgical music can be transparent or fail to be transparent. Homilies can be transparent or fail to be transparent.

I've heard just enough bad homilies, that is opaque homilies that left me thinking about the homilist instead of God—to appreciate how iconically translucent most of the homilies I've heard are, and to realize that this is a privilege and not a right that will automatically be satisfied. The opaque Orthodox homilies don't (usually) get details wrong; they get the details right but don't go any further. But this is not the whole truth about homilies. A homily that is written like an icon—not necessarily written out but drawn into being first and foremost by the spirit, out of love, prayer, and spiritual discipline, can be not only transparent but luminous and let Heaven's light shine through.

Some wag said, "A sermon is something I wouldn't go

across the street to hear, but something I'd go across the country to deliver." I do not mean by saying this to compete with, or replace, the view of homilies as guidance which God has provided for our good, but a successful homily does more than inform. It edifies, and the best homilies are luminously transparent. They don't leave the faithful thinking about the preacher—even about how good he is—but about the glory of God. When icons, liturgy, and homilies rise to transparency, they draw us beyond themselves to worship God.

My denser and more inaccessible musings might be worth reading, but they should never be read as a homily; the photographs in [my slideshow of Cambridge](#) might capture real beauty but should never be mounted on an icon stand for people to venerate; my best cooking experiments may be much more than edible but simply do not belong in the Eucharist—but my cooking can belong at coffee hour. The Divine Liturgy at its best builds up to Holy Communion and then flows into a common meal (in my culture, coffee hour) that may not be Holy Communion but is communion, and just as my more edible cooking may not be fit for the Eucharist but belongs in a common meal, I am delighted to tell people I have a literature and art website at [Jonathan's Corner](#) which has both short and long fiction, musings and essays, poetry, visual art, and (perhaps I mention) computer software that's more artistic than practical. I have put a lot of love into my website, and it gives me great pleasure to share it. If its contents should not usurp the place of holy icons or the Divine Liturgy, I believe they do belong in the fellowship hall and sacred life beyond the sanctuary. Worshipping life is head and lord to the everyday life of the worshipping faithful, but that does not mean a denigration of the faithful living as lesser priests. The sacramental priesthood exists precisely as the crystallization and ornament of our priestly life in the world. As I write, I am returning from the Eucharist and the

ordination of more than one clergy. Orthodox clergy insist that unless people say "Amen!" to the consecration of the bread and wine which become the holy body and the holy blood of Christ, and unless they say, "Axios!" ("He is worthy!") to the ordination, then the consecration or the ordination doesn't happen. Unlike in Catholicism, a priest cannot celebrate the Divine Liturgy by himself in principle, because the Divine Liturgy is in principle the work of God accomplished through the cooperation of priest and faithful, and to say that a priest does this himself is as odd as saying that the priest has a hug or a conversation by himself. The priest is head and even lord of the parish, but under a richer, Christian understanding of headship and lordship, which means that as the artist in his care he must listen to the faithful God has entrusted to his inadequate care, listening to God about who God and not the priest wants them to become, and both serve them and love them into richer being. (And, just as it is wrong for an artist to domineer his creation, it is even more toxic for a priest to domineer, *ahem*, work to improve the faithful in his parish. The sharpest warning I've heard a bishop give to newly ordained clergy is about a priest who decided he was the best thing to happen to the parish in his care, and immediately set about improving all the faithful according to his enlightened vision. It was a much more bluntly delivered warning than I've said about doing that to art.) The priest is ordained as the crystallization and crown of the faithful's priestly call. The liturgy which priest (and faithful) is not to be cut off when the ceremony ends; it is to flow out and imprint its glory on the faithful's life and work. Not only the liturgical but the iconic is to flow out and set the pace for life.

Art is to be the broader expression of the iconic.

An Open Letter to Catholics on Orthodoxy and Ecumenism: What might be called "the Orthodox question"

I expect ecumenical outreach to Orthodox has been quite a trying experience for Catholics. It must seem to Catholics like they have made Orthodoxy their top ecumenical priority, and after they have done their best and bent over backwards, many Orthodox have shrugged and said, "That makes one of us!" or else made a nastier response. And I wonder if Catholics have felt a twinge of the Lord's frustration in saying, "All day long I have held out my hands to a rebellious and stubborn people." (Rom 10:21)

In my experience, most Catholic priests have been hospitable: warm to the point of being warmer to me than my own priests. It almost seems as if the recipe for handling Orthodox is to express a great deal of warmth and warmly express hope for Catholics and Orthodox to be united. And that, in a nutshell, is how Catholics seem to conceive what might be called "the Orthodox question."

And I'm afraid I have something painful to say. Catholics think Orthodox are basically the same, and that they understand us. And I'm asking you to take a tough pill to swallow: Catholics do not understand Orthodox. You think you do, but you don't.

I'd like to talk about an elephant in the room. This elephant, however painfully obvious to Orthodox, seems something Catholics are strikingly oblivious to.

A conciliatory gesture (or so I was told)

All the Orthodox I know were puzzled for instance, that the Pope thought it conciliatory to retain titles such as "Vicar of Jesus Christ," "Successor of the Prince of the Apostles," and "Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church," but drop "Patriarch of the West." Orthodox complain that the Roman bishop "was given primacy but demanded supremacy," and the title "Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church" is offensive. Every bishop is the successor of the prince of the apostles, so reserving that title to the Pope is out of line. But Orthodoxy in both ancient and modern times regards the Pope as the Patriarch of Rome, and the Orthodox Church, having His Holiness IGNATIUS the Patriarch of Antioch and all the East, has good reason to call the Patriarch of Rome, "the Patriarch of the West." The response I heard to His Holiness Benedict dropping that one title while retaining the others, ranged from "Huh?" to, "Hello? Do you understand us at *all*?"

What Catholics never acknowledge

That is not a point I wish to belabor; it is a relatively minor example next to how, when in my experience Catholics have

warmly asked Orthodox to reunify, never once have I seen any recognition or manifest awareness of the foremost concern Orthodox have about Rome and Constantinople being united. Never once have I seen mere acknowledgment of the Orthodox concern about what Rome most needs to repent of.

Let me clarify that slightly. I've heard Catholics acknowledge that Catholics have committed atrocities against Orthodox in the past, and Catholics may express regrets over wrongs from ages past and chide Orthodox for a lack of love in not being reunified. But when I say, "what Rome most needs to repent of," I am not taking the historian's view. I'm not talking about sack of the Constantinople, although people more Orthodox than me may insist on things like that. I am not talking about what Rome has done in the past to repent of, but what is continuing now. I am talking about the present tense, and in the present tense. When Catholics come to me and honor Orthodoxy with deep warmth and respect and express a desire for reunion, what I have never once heard mention of is the recantation of Western heresy.

This may be another tough pill to swallow. Catholics may know that Orthodox consider Catholics to be heretics, but this never enters the discussion when Catholics are being warm and trying to welcome Orthodox into their embrace. It's never acknowledged or addressed. The warm embrace instead affirms that we have a common faith, a common theology, a common tradition: we are the same, or so Orthodox are told, in all essentials. If Orthodox have not restored communion, we are told that we do not recognize that we have all the doctrinal agreement properly needed for reunification.

But don't we agree on major things? Rome's bishops say we do!

I would like to outline three areas of difference and give some flesh to the Orthodox claim that there are unresolved differences. I would like to outline one issue about what is theology, and then move on to social ethics, and close on ecumenism itself. I will somewhat artificially limit myself to three; some people more Orthodox than me may wonder why, for instance, I don't discuss the filioque clause (answer: I am not yet Orthodox enough to appreciate the importance given by my spiritual betters, even if I do trust that they are my spiritual betters). But there's a lot in these three.

To Catholics who insist that we share a common faith, I wish to ask a question that may sound flippant or even abrasive. A common faith? *Really?* Are you ready to de-canonize Thomas Aquinas and repudiate his scholasticism? Because Orthodox faith is something incompatible with the "theology" of Thomas Aquinas, and if you don't understand this, you're missing something fundamental to Orthodox understandings of theology. And if you're wondering why I used quotes around "theology," let me explain. Or, perhaps better, let me give an example.

See the two texts below. One is chapter 5 in St. Dionysius (or, if you prefer, pseudo-Dionysius), *The Mystical Theology*. That gem is on the left. To the right is a partial rewriting of the ideas in the style of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiæ*.

**St. Dionysius the
Areopagite, "The
Mystical Theology"**

**Rewritten in the
scholastic style of Thomas
Aquinas**

Again, as we climb higher *Question Five: Whether God*
we say this. It is not soul or *may accurately be described*

**St. Dionysius the
Areopagite, "The
Mystical Theology"**

mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech, or understanding. Nor is it speech *per se*, understanding *per se*. It cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by understanding. It is not number or order, greatness or smallness, equality or inequality, similarity or dissimilarity. It is not immovable, moving, or at rest. It has no power, it is not power, nor is it life. It is not a substance, nor is it eternity or time. It cannot be grasped by the understanding since it is neither knowledge nor truth. It is not kingship. It is not wisdom. It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness. Nor is it a spirit, in the sense that we understand the term. It is not sonship or fatherhood and it is nothing known to us or to any other being. It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being. Existing beings

**Rewritten in the
scholastic style of Thomas
Aquinas**

with words and concepts.

Objection One: It appears that God may be accurately described, for otherwise he could not be described as existing. For we read, *I AM WHO AM*, and if God cannot be described as existing, then assuredly nothing else can. But we know that things exist, therefore God may be accurately described as existing.

Objection Two: It would seem that God may be described with predicates, for Scripture calls him Father, Son, King, Wisdom, etc.

Objection Three: It appears that either affirmations or negations must accurately describe God, for between an affirmation and its negation, exactly one of them must be

**St. Dionysius the
Areopagite, "The
Mystical Theology"**

do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as they are. There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth—it is none of these. It is beyond every assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, it is also beyond every denial.

**Rewritten in the
scholastic style of Thomas
Aquinas**

true.

On the Contrary, I reply that every affirmation and negation is finite, and in the end inadequate beyond measure, incapable of containing or of circumscribing God.

We should remember that the ancients described God in imperfect terms rather than say nothing about him at all...

Lost in translation?

There is something lost in "translation" here. What exactly is lost? Remember Robert Frost's words, "Nothing of poetry is lost in translation except for the poetry." There is a famous, ancient maxim in the Orthodox Church's treasured [Philokalia](#) saying, "A theologian is one who prays truly, and one who prays truly is a theologian:" theology is an invitation to prayer. And the original *Mystical Theology* as rendered on the left is exactly that: an invitation to prayer, while the rewrite in the style of the *Summa Theologiæ* has been castrated: it is only an invitation to analysis and an impressively deft solution to a logic puzzle. The ideas are all

preserved: nothing of the theology is lost in translation except for the theology. And this is part of why Archimandrite Vasileos, steeped in the nourishing, prayerful theology of the Orthodox Church, bluntly writes in [Hymn of Entry](#) that scholastic theology is "an indigestible stone."

Thomas Aquinas drew on Greek Fathers and in particular St. John the Damascene. He gathered some of the richest theology of the East and turned it into something that is not theology to Orthodox: nothing of the Greek theology was lost in the scholastic translation but the theology! And there is more amiss in that Thomas Aquinas also drew on "the Philosopher," Aristotle, and all the materialistic seeds in Aristotelianism. (The Greeks never lost Aristotle, but they also never made such a big deal about him, and to be called an Aristotelian could be a strike against you.) There is a spooky hint of the "methodological agnosticism" of today's academic theology—the insistence that maybe you have religious beliefs, but you need to push them aside, at least for the moment, to write serious theology. The seed of secular academic "theology" is already present in how Thomas Aquinas transformed the Fathers.

This is a basic issue with far-reaching implications.

Am I *seriously* suggesting that Rome de-canonize Thomas Aquinas? Not exactly. I am trying to point out what level of repentance and recantation would be called for in order that full communion would be appropriate. I am not seriously asking that Rome de-canonize Thomas Aquinas. I *am* suggesting, though, that Rome begin to recognize that nastier and deeper cuts than this would be needed for full communion between Rome and Orthodoxy. And I know that it is not pleasant to think of rejoining the Orthodox Church as (*shudder*) a reconciled heretic. I know it's not pleasant. I am, by the grace of God, a reconciled heretic myself, and I recanted Western heresy myself. It's a

humbling position, and if it's too big a step for you to take, it is something to at least *recognize* that it's a big step to take, and one that Rome has not yet taken.

The Saint and the Activist

Let me describe two very different images of what life is for. The one I will call "the saint" is that, quite simply, life is for the contemplation of God, and the means to contemplation is largely asceticism: the concrete practices of a life of faith. The other one, which I will call, "the activist," is living to change the world as a secular ideology would understand changing the world. In practice the "saint" and the "activist" may be the ends of a spectrum rather than a rigid dichotomy, but I wish at least to distinguish the two, and make some remarks about modern Catholic social teaching.

Modern Catholic social teaching could be enlightened. It could be well meant. It could be humane. It could be carefully thought out. It could be a recipe for a better society. It could be providential. It could be something we should learn from, or something we need. It could be any number of things, but what it absolutely is *not* is theology. It is absolutely not spiritually nourishing theology. If, to Orthodox, scholastic theology like that of Thomas Aquinas is as indigestible as a stone, modern Catholic social teaching takes indigestibility to a whole new level—like indigestible shards of broken glass.

The 2005 [Deus Caritas Est](#) names the *Song of Songs* three times, and that is without precedent in the Catholic social encyclicals from the 1891 [Rerum Novarum](#) on. Look for references to the *Song of Songs* in their footnotes—I don't think you'll find any, or at least I didn't. This is a symptom of a real problem, a lack of the kind of theology that would think of things like the *Song of Songs*—which is highly significant. The *Song of Songs* is a favorite in mystical

theology, the prayerful theology that flows from faith, and mystical theology is not easily found in the social encyclicals. I am aware of the friction when secular academics assume that Catholic social teaching is one more political ideology to be changed at will. I give some benefit of the doubt to Catholics who insist that there are important differences, even if I'm skeptical over whether the differences are *quite* so big as they are made out to be. But without insisting that Catholic social teaching is *just* another activist ideology, I will say that it is anything but a pure "saint" model, and it mixes in the secular "activist" model to a degree that is utterly unlawful to Orthodox.

Arius is more scathingly condemned in Orthodox liturgy than even Judas. And, contrary to current fashion, I really do believe Arius and Arianism are as bad as the Fathers say. But Arius never dreamed either of reasoning out systematic theology or of establishing social justice. His *Thalia* are a (perhaps very bad) invitation to worship, not a systematic theology or a plan for social justice. In those regards, Catholic theology not only does not reach the standard of the old Orthodox giants: it does not even reach the standard of the old arch-heretics!

Catholics today celebrate Orthodoxy and almost everything they know about us save that we are not in full communion. Catholic priests encourage icons, or reading the Greek fathers, or the Jesus prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." But what Catholics may not always be mindful of is that they celebrate Orthodoxy and put it alongside things that are utterly anathema to Orthodox: like heartily endorsing the Orthodox Divine Liturgy and placing it alongside the Roman mass, Protestant services, Unitarian meetings, Hindu worship, and the spiritualist *séance* as all amply embraced by Rome's enfolding bosom.

What we today call "ecumenism" is at its root a Protestant

phenomenon. It stems from how Protestants sought to honor Christ's prayer that we may all be one, when they took it as non-negotiable that they were part of various Protestant denominations which remained out of communion with Rome. The Catholic insistence that each Protestant who returns to Rome heals part of the Western schism is a nonstarter for this "ecumenism:" this "ecumenism" knows we need unity but takes schism as non-negotiable: which is to say that this "ecumenism" rejects the understanding of Orthodox, some Catholics, and even the first Protestants that full communion is full communion and what Christ prayed for was a full communion that assumed doctrinal unity.

One more thing that is very important to many Orthodox, and that I have never once heard acknowledged or even mentioned by the Catholics reaching so hard for ecumenical embrace is that many Orthodox are uneasy at best with ecumenism. It has been my own experience that the more devout and more mature Orthodox are, the more certainly they regard ecumenism as a spiritual poison. Some of the more conservative speak of "ecumenism awareness" as Americans involved in the war on drugs speak of "drug awareness."

Catholics can be a lot like Orthodox in their responses to Protestants and Protestant ideas of ecumenism; one might see a Catholic responding to an invitation to join an ecumenical communion service at First Baptist by saying something like,

I'm flattered by your ecumenical outreach... And really am, um, uh, *honored* that you see me as basically the same as an Evangelical... And I really appreciate that I am as welcome to join you in receiving communion as your very own flock... Really, I'm flattered...

...But full communion is full communion, and it reflects fundamental confusion to put the cart before the horse. For us to act otherwise would be a travesty. I know that you may be generously overlooking our differences, but even if it means being *less* generous, we need to give proper attention to our unresolved differences before anything approaching full communion would be appropriate.

But Catholics seem to be a bit like Protestants in their ecumenical advances to Orthodox. If I understand correctly, whereas Rome used to tell Orthodox, "You would be welcome to take communion with us, but we would rather you obey your bishops," now I am told by Rome that I may remain Orthodox while receiving Roman communion, and my reply is,

I'm flattered by your ecumenical outreach... And really am, um, uh, *honored* that you see me as basically the same as any Catholic... And I really appreciate that I am as welcome to join you in receiving communion as your very own flock... Really, I'm flattered...

...But full communion is full communion, and it reflects fundamental confusion to put the cart before the horse. For us to act otherwise would be a travesty. I know that you may be generously overlooking our differences, but even if it means being *less* generous, we need to give proper attention to our unresolved differences before anything approaching full communion would be appropriate.

If the Roman Church is almost Orthodox in its dealings with Protestants, it in turn seems almost Protestant in its

dealings with Orthodox. It may be that Rome looks at Orthodoxy and sees things that are almost entirely permitted in the Roman Church: almost every point of theology or spirituality that is *the only way to do things* in Orthodoxy is at least a *permitted option* to Roman Catholics. (So Rome looks at Orthodoxy, or at least some Romans do, and see Orthodox as something that can be allowed to be a full-fledged part of the Roman communion: almost as Protestants interested in ecumenism look at the Roman Church as being every bit as much a full-fledged Christian denomination as the best of Protestant groups.) But the reverse of this phenomenon is *not* true: that is, Orthodox do not look at Rome and say, "Everything that you require or allow in spiritual theology is also allowed in healthy Eastern Orthodoxy." Furthermore, I have never seen awareness or sensitivity to those of Orthodox who do not consider ecumenism, at least between traditional communions, to be a self-evidently good thing to work for: Catholics can't conceive of a good reason for why Orthodox would not share their puppyish enthusiasm for ecumenism. And I have never heard a Catholic who expressed a desire for the restoration for full communion show any perception or willingness to work for the Orthodox concerns about what needs to feed into any *appropriate* restoration of communion, namely the recantation of Western heresy represented by figures like Thomas Aquinas and not only by [Mater et Magistra](#) or liberal Catholic dissent.

Conclusion: are we at the eve of an explosion?

I may have mentioned several elephants in the room. Let me close by mentioning one more that many Orthodox are painfully aware of, even if Catholics are oblivious.

Orthodoxy may remind Western Christians of Rome's

ancient origins. But there is an important way in which I would compare Orthodoxy today to Western Christianity on the eve of the Reformation. Things hadn't exploded. Yet. [Note added in 2018: this was composed several years before the Patriarch of Moscow broke communion with the Ecumenical Patriarch.] But there were serious problems and trouble brewing, and I'm not sure it's that clear to people how much trouble is brewing.

Your ecumenical advances and efforts to draw us closer to Rome's enfolding bosom come at a rough and delicate time:

What if, while there was serious trouble but not yet schisms spreading like wildfire, the East had reached out to their estranged Western brethren and said:

*Good news! You really don't need
scholasticism... And you don't exactly need
transsubstantiation either... And you don't need
anywhere such a top-down Church heirarchy...
And you really don't need to be in communion
with the Patriarch of Rome... And...*

There is a profound schism brewing in the Orthodox Church. It may not be within your power to stop it, but it may be within your power to avoid giving it an early start, and it may be within your power to avoid making the wreckage even worse.

The best thing I can think of to say is simply, "God have mercy on us all."

Cordially yours,

[Christos Jonathan Seth Hayward](#)

The Sunday of St. Mary of Egypt; Lent, 2009.

The Pleasure-Pain Syndrome

Lorem Ipsum

In web design, as in graphic-related design since the 1500's, it is traditional to use a standard block of text called "lorem ipsum" when you're trying to see how the page will look graphically and you don't want to be distracted into reading the text itself. The standard block of "pseudo-text" reads:

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur
 adipisicing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor
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 non proident, sunt in culpa qui officia deserunt
 mollit anim id est laborum.

The text above, somewhat shortened and corrupted, comes from a quotation of "de Finibus Bonorum et Malorum", section 1.10.32, by Cicero, written in 45 BC. The original

text interests me not because it is at the root of the standard piece of dummy text, but for what it says (H. Rackham, 1914):

But I must explain to you how all this mistaken idea of denouncing pleasure and praising pain was born and I will give you a complete account of the system, and expound the actual teachings of the great explorer of the truth, the master-builder of human happiness. No one rejects, dislikes, or avoids pleasure itself, because it is pleasure, but because those who do not know how to pursue pleasure rationally encounter consequences that are extremely painful. Nor again is there anyone who loves or pursues or desires to obtain pain of itself, because it is pain, but because occasionally circumstances occur in which toil and pain can procure him some great pleasure. To take a trivial example, which of us ever undertakes laborious physical exercise, except to obtain some advantage from it? But who has any right to find fault with a man who chooses to enjoy a pleasure that has no annoying consequences, or one who avoids a pain that produces no resultant pleasure?

The copyright date is 45 BC, were such ancient works to be under copyright, but I'll take this to be a straightforward statement of the obvious in our day. Let me repeat the last sentence: **"But who has any right to find fault with a man who chooses to enjoy a pleasure that has no annoying consequences, or one who avoids a pain that produces no resultant pleasure?"** There is a real flaw in this way of looking at things.

The pleasure-pain syndrome

Certain selections of the [Philokalia](#) suggest an understanding that imply this statement to be based on a philosophical error. Physical pleasure and pain are tied together, and trying to experience pleasure with "no annoying consequences" is like trying to withdraw money from your bank account without making your bank balance any lower. It's a get-rich-quick scheme that boils down to poor math skills. It is a sign of confusion to try to separate the sugar rush from the sugar crash.

There are certain points where we are warned of the pleasure-pain syndrome: the warnings children are given about street narcotics is not that they fail to deliver pleasure, but after delivering pleasure they deliver all the pain that comes with it. It's kind of like Disney's *Aladdin*, where Aladdin goads Jafar into wishing, "I wish to be an all powerful genie!", and then tells him, "You wanted to be a genie, you got it! And everything that goes with it!" Shackles appear on Jafar's wrists, and he is sucked into a lamp's "itty bitty living space"—if anything, a sunny and optimistic image to compare with "everything that goes with" addiction to street drugs.

The passages in the [Philokalia](#) adapting and elaborating St. Maximos Confessor's teaching make highly emphatic claims about the pleasure-pain syndrome. They very emphatically state that Christ, who was born of a virgin, was conceived without any trace of physical pleasure (sexual or otherwise), and born without pain: a sufficient Redeemer, in other words, needed to be conceived and born outside of the pleasure-pain syndrome. He took the redemptive effects of sufferings he would not earn; other writers have stated that sinless Christ couldn't have died of ripe old age, but in order to die would have to have a "borrowed" death imposed from outside as occurred in the Crucifixion. Mankind entered the pleasure-pain syndrome in a fall to pleasure and sensuality,

and to be rescued from drowning, we need a Savior with one foot solidly planted on the dry land of the shore. This is the extent to which that work frames both our destruction and our salvation in terms of the pleasure-pain syndrome.

Speaking in terms of the pleasure-pain syndrome is not a central feature of Orthodox theology, but dispassion is beyond being a central point; it is crucial and receives center stage not just in the [Philokalia](#) but in other classics like [The Ladder of Divine Ascent](#), which is read during Lent as a consistent feature of monastic discipline.

There is a direct and vital relationship between dispassion and the pleasure-pain syndrome: dispassion is a state of spiritual freedom where one is no longer shackled and governed by the pleasure-pain syndrome or any passion allied to it.

There are many ways one could frame things, and the pleasure-pain syndrome does not appear to be a central theme in the [Philokalia](#) overall, let alone an encompassing theme in Orthodox spirituality. But the insight is valid, and for that matter may not be distinctively Orthodox. One Orthodox friend explained to me why he had stopped watching movies: he noticed that an hour or two after a movie ended, he found himself in a depression. Jerry Mander may provide a theory as to why in his [Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television](#), a 1978 title that is still salient, and the book has no pretensions of speaking from a religious tradition. But he argues at length that when you gaze long into television, television gazes long into you: he makes some rather chilling suggestions about what effect television has on where people look for and experience pleasure (in a word, the argument is, "When you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail."). He suggests that when television provides a major source of pleasure, there are things that follow in its wake. It would not seem too difficult to transpose his basic insights in

terms of having a cell phone that occupies your attention all the time. Treacherously addictive Internet porn may be a much worse kind of pleasure than most others one might discuss, but it is not the only one where a pleasure-pain syndrome is at play.

Even if the economy is dire, I am concerned we are in an age of pleasures of all kinds, and these are the pleasures of the pleasure-pain syndrome. The [Philokalia](#) discusses people who try to pursue pleasure and avoid pain, and perhaps times have not changed much... or perhaps we have put the problem on steroids. Think about the short, short list of pleasures that were around when the [Philokalia](#) was being written, warning of the pleasure-pain syndrome. Then compare that list to today. If it is a basic philosophical error to pursue pleasures and try to avoid invisibly attached pains, and if the observation is true when pleasure means simple foods, then we've really put things on steroids if pleasure is TV, movies, smartphones, internet, and so on. It's not just "friendship with benefits" (or other kinds of more casual sex) that brings pleasure entangled with pain, and there are things about those passages in the [Philokalia](#) that seem like they had been written yesterday; the portrayal of human nature remains insightful today (1st century of various texts, 53):

[M]an finds by experience that every pleasure is inevitably succeeded by pain, and so directs his whole effort towards pleasure and does all he can to avoid pain. He struggles with all his might to attain pleasure and he fights against pain with immense zeal. By doing this he hopes to keep the two apart from each other—which is impossible... [H]e is, it appears, ignorant that pleasure can never exist without pain. For pain is intertwined with pleasure, even though he seems to escape the notice of those who suffer it.

The microcosm of praise

Becoming attached to praises is another example of the pleasure-pain syndrome at work. Mark Twain reportedly said, "I can live for two months on a good compliment," and he was emphasizing the point partly by exaggerating how long one can live on a compliment. If one does live off of compliments, there's a problem: one gets hungry again. Praise is very powerful at the beginning, but after time men require stronger and stronger doses. And this may be why the Orthodox leaders I have known give very, very few compliments. They decisively treat other people with love and respect, but they rarely make a minor social compliment to help others feel better. Some of them are not very comfortable when others give them compliments to help them feel better. Some run from it like fire and poison.

One of the basic rules of the Orthodox life is that while monastics are called to abandon all property, the rest of us may own property but are required to own it with detachment. Monasticism aims at being impervious to pleasure and pain alike, but the Bible also provides a foundation for owning things, being married and pursuing ventures, while attempting the difficult work of detachment ([I Corinthians 7:29-31, RSV](#)):

I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short; from now on, let those who have wives live as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no goods, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the form of this world is passing away.

As regards human compliments, the lesson would seem to be this: *Listen, but do not inhale. Do not let compliments*

become the nourishment you feed off of. Better by far not to receive compliments at all than to become dependent on them as your spiritual food. And you might be particularly cautious about those compliments that are peppered throughout conversation to make you feel better; they are even more treacherous.

Deep Magic

In [The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe](#), the Emperor's headsman, the White Witch, incredulously asks the Lion if he does not know the Deep Magic from the Dawn of Time: that a traitor must die and if the traitor does not die, Narnia will perish in fire and water. The Royal Lion in fact does know the Deep Magic. And he moves on.

But Aslan also knew something the White Witch didn't. He knew from within the Deeper Magic from before the Dawn of Time, that if an innocent victim were willingly slain in a traitor's stead, even death would begin working backwards: and so the White Witch slew Aslan to her defeat.

There is Deep Magic with pleasure and pain: what you sow, so shall you reap. If you sow pleasure to the flesh, you will reap pain to the flesh. *The pleasure-pain syndrome is not the sort of thing you can escape by pleasure.*

But there is Deeper Magic, and its supreme example is found in [Philippians 2:5-11, RSV](#):

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

St. John's Paschal homily pours out the Deeper Magic even more plainly:

By descending into Hell, He made Hell captive.
 He embittered it when it tasted of His flesh.
 And Isaiah, foretelling this, did cry:
 Hell, said he, was embittered
 When it encountered Thee in the lower regions.

It was embittered, for it was abolished.
 It was embittered, for it was mocked.
 It was embittered, for it was slain.
 It was embittered, for it was overthrown.
 It was embittered, for it was fettered in chains.
 It took a body, and met God face to face.
 It took earth, and encountered Heaven.
 It took that which was seen, and fell upon the
 unseen.

O Death, where is thy sting?
 O Hell, where is thy victory?

Christ is risen, and thou art overthrown!
 Christ is risen, and the demons are fallen!
 Christ is risen, and the angels rejoice!
 Christ is risen, and life reigns!
 Christ is risen, and not one dead remains in the
 grave.
 For Christ, being risen from the dead,
 Is become the first-fruits of those who have fallen

asleep.

To Him be glory and dominion
Unto ages of ages.

Amen.

And what is going on here is no unique exception. What is going on here is the supreme instance of a universal law, the same as in the glorified "Hall of Fame" in [Hebrews 11, RSV](#):

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the men of old received divine approval. By faith we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of things which do not appear.

By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he received approval as righteous, God bearing witness by accepting his gifts; he died, but through his faith he is still speaking. By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was attested as having pleased God. And without faith it is impossible to please him. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.

By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, took heed and constructed an ark for the saving of his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness which comes by faith. By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to

a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore. These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer up his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your descendants be named." He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. By faith Joseph, at the

end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his burial. By faith Moses, when he was born, was hid for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful; and they were not afraid of the king's edict. By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. He considered abuse suffered for the Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he looked to the reward. By faith he left Egypt, not being afraid of the anger of the king; for he endured as seeing him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the first-born might not touch them. By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as if on dry land; but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned.

By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given friendly welcome to the spies.

And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets — who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to

accept release, that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and scourging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, ill-treated — of whom the world was not worthy — wandering over deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

The universal law, the Deeper Magic, plays out in Christ, in his saints, and ultimately the whole Church. Never mind that we do not do the feats of saints; we probably shouldn't try, and it is a trick of the demons to tempt inexperienced monks to take on impossible virtues. If we suffer for Christ, however small the way, it *genuinely* matters.

A more excellent way

Is there any alternative to the pleasure-pain syndrome?

St. Paul, in the great hymn to love, writes ([I Corinthians 13, RSV](#)):

If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never ends; as for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and our prophecy is imperfect; but when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways.

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood. So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

The part in bold seemed to me, at least at first glance, like it didn't belong. But there is something in the passage that hinges on giving up childish ways. Faith, hope, and love are virtues of Heaven, the virtues of Heavenly life lived on earth. Giving up childish ways, in effect, is giving up the quest for earthly comfort. As C.S. Lewis observed, Heaven cannot give earthly comfort no matter how hard we seek it. Earth cannot give Heavenly comfort: you are shopping at an empty store to ask earth for Heavenly comfort. But earth cannot give earthly comfort either: you are *still* shopping at

an empty store to ask earth for even earthly comfort, and in fact stepping into the pleasure-pain syndrome. The only comfort to be had is Heavenly comfort. The words in bold could be paraphrased, "When I was a child, I sought earthly comfort, inescapably embracing the pleasure-pain syndrome. When I became a man, I put the search for earthly comfort behind me—and sought and received heavenly comfort instead." Those who sow to the flesh will reap pain from the flesh, but those who sow to the Spirit will reap joy from the Spirit. The words about "I put childish ways behind me" serve as a hinge between letting go of the pleasure-pain syndrome, and the virtues of the Life of Heaven begun here, now.

Let us return to the beginning of Cicero's quotation behind "lorem ipsum:" "*But I must explain to you how all this mistaken idea of denouncing pleasure and praising pain was born...*" Can we say that Cicero was right all along? Only if we really stretch his words' meaning. Saints in pursuit of Heaven's comfort and Heaven's joy spurn mere material comfort and are purified through material pain. Arguably the text can be stretched to say that the saints reject pleasure in the pursuit of greater pleasure, and they accept pain likewise in the pursuit of greater pleasure. But something deeper than pleasure is going on, and Cicero's passage quoted above is stretched to the point of not meaning very much if it is interpreted this way. While the ancients were very open to the idea of finding "Christians before Christ" among the pagans, it is a real stretch to interpret Cicero's passage as describing a Son of Man who came not to be served but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many. Perhaps this Son of Man finds the deepest, fullest, richest pleasure there is: but Cicero will not take us there, and his argument is shortsighted with no power to free us from the pleasure-pain syndrome.

[Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our](#)

Lord! So then, I of myself serve the law of God and its heavenly comforts with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin and its pleasure-pain syndrome.

Pride

The Age of Rampant Pride

Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?

The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and his anointed, saying, "Let us burst their bonds asunder, and cast their cords from us."

He who sits in the heavens laughs; the LORD has them in derision.

[Psalm 2:1-4, RSV](#)

These words are timeless, and have a singular relevance to our own day, when it is not just the kings of the earth, the rulers, who counsel against the Lord and his Christ, saying, "Let us burst their bonds apart, and cast their cords from us." Times were bad enough when the kings of the earth pursued this occupation: today this pride is the avocation of the rank-and-file, the spiritual vocation embraced by John Q. Public.

Pride has always been present as an adversary to our well-being, but sociologists say that each generation is more "narcissistic" than the last: each generation is more deeply enmeshed in pride. When I was growing up I was urged on all fronts to have a healthy self-esteem; I was to feel I was special. Both these things would alarm the Church Fathers; speaking of "a healthy self-esteem" is like speaking of an alcoholic having "a healthy insatiable thirst for for eighty proof hard liquor." The next generation after me is the generation that has to have its birthdays and other celebrations be a cut apart from the "ordinary": the old formula of inviting a child's friends and friend's parents, ensuring a plentiful supply of sugary food, and hanging out for a couple of hours just doesn't cut it. There has to be some special stamp imprinted on it, like a little girl having hours of costume and makeup to dress up as a fairy. To be adequate, a celebration need not merely be a cut above the old formula; it should ideally be a cut above the other "special" celebrations.

Pride has been called "the flaw of Narcissus," and it is astonishing how well pride is represented and portrayed in the story. Before the end of the story, Narcissus was haughty, even scorning those who adored him—it is the character of pride, not only to view oneself highly, but to scorn others. (And it is the nature of humility, not only to view oneself modestly, but to genuinely admire and respect others.) But the central feature of the story is how Narcissus meets his end: even though no other person assaulted him, he was doomed as soon as he saw his own reflection in the water and stared in rapt fascination at his own beauty, until he pined away to nothing. He died because not even his bodily needs could take his attention from his entranced admiration of his own beauty. ("Narcissus" etymologically comes from "narke", meaning sleep or drug-like drowsiness, and Narcissus might as well have been on drugs.) *If you want a glimpse into the soul of Narcissism, read the myth*

of Narcissus.

Pick it up by the heart and it is called narcissism, pride, or self-esteem; pick it up by the head and it is called subjectivism. Subjectivism is insisting on believing what you want to believe, even when you know, or used to know, that it's wrong. The increasing standard of narcissism in people's lives is matched by an increasing standard of subjectivism at the university, an issue argued by the scholar who wrote [C. S. Lewis and a Problem of Evil: An Investigation of a Pervasive Theme](#). Here "problem of evil" does not refer to theodicy, but subjectivism. Subjectivism says, "I will believe what I want to believe," and far enough into it, subjectivism says, "I am right and God is wrong." At a low dose, subjectivism is called "wishful thinking;" at a high enough dose it is called blasphemy. And subjectivism comes from pride and builds up pride.

Pride Unfurls and Unfolds

The poison of pride unfurls in many ways.

Gay Pride

Where does "gay pride" fit into this? As a full-fledged member of pride unfurling, and as the wrong medicine. There is a lot of queer pain and suffering, and the idea that being queer is something to take pride in is to seek medication for this. It may be the wrong approach, but just as enough alcohol will seem to solve any problem for the short term, gay pride promises to medicate pain.

And the term is well chosen. It may not call itself subjectivism, but **transgendered surgery is an effort to set right what God got wrong**. Now gay pride may not on the surface claim to be pride; it may be on every conscious level an effort to come to terms with reality and celebrate who you really are. But pride cannot deliver that;

only repentance and humility can make such a delivery. Only repentance and humility can make good on the promise. Narcissism in general is counterfeit coin: the classic [Narcissism: Denial of the True Self](#) could well enough have been written about gay pride. I have known one person who faced strong homosexual temptations who was at home with himself and truly happy; he came to terms with who he was, and he did it as *ex-gay*.

But if you think, "I'm straight; I don't have to face that issue," you are wrong. There are many ways we drink the same poison; LGBTQ's are just honest enough to correctly name their salve as "pride."

Gnosticism

Gnosticism is another theatre for this to play out in. Some years back, a few lone voices warned that the heresy of Gnosticism was coming back. Now you have to be pretty obtuse to deny a resurgence of Gnosticism; you can say if you want that contemporary attempts to resurrect the heresy are creating another beast altogether, but it is rather provocative to deny that recent years have seen a substantial interest in Gnosticism.

At one level of insight, one may enumerate various ideas and claims found in Gnosticism. At the next level, one may notice that Gnosticism is not a stable system of ideas; it is a process that moves from one point to another, and to study it as a historical phenomenon is to force it into something it isn't, just as a study of untreated cancer across history would be mistaken, grossly mistaken, to find historical vogues, trends, and patterns in how tumors have grown in different ages in history. But there is one more level of insight worth mentioning.

Gnosticism, at its core, is not powered by a framework of ideas (for that matter, neither is Orthodoxy, even if her

ideas are more stable). It offers a good news of escape that hinges on a mood of despair, and Gnostic esoterica are a kind of spiritual pornography, almost, that slakes the thirst of someone thirsting for an escape from despair. And there is bad news and good news for people pursuing such projects. The bad news is that escape is not possible beyond a shimmer that leaves one thirsting; the good news is announced,

Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

[John 4:13-14, RSV](#)

The bad news is that escape is not possible. The good news is that escape is not needed, and [in the story of St. Photini, the woman at the well](#), she tried to enlist his help in fleeing from her shame and her pain, and he pulled her through her shame, helping her face what she was trying to flee, and left her running without shame through the whole city, "He told me all that I ever did."

The despair that builds a thirst for Gnosticism and escape appears in times of plenty; it can also occur in times of economic collapse and loss. But the final assessment applies to both: escape is not possible. But escape is not needed.

Humility

And what does this have to do with pride? As much as the spiritual honesty of humility helps open one's eyes to the beauty of others and the world ("[in humility count others better than yourselves](#)"), pride bears blindness and leaves one seeing a despicable world from which one can only wish escape. Hubris is called blinding arrogance, and it alike

blinds you from your weaknesses and blinds you to what is delightful and good in the world around you. Walk far enough along the path of Narcissus, and like him you will find yourself despising those who adore you.

And I would like to comment in particular on "[in humility count others better than yourselves.](#)" This is bitter medicine and an insult to our pride. I don't like it personally, and I'm not sure I've seen a person who can read those words and not squirm. I'm not near that spiritual maturity, but for all that I recognize and confess that this is not only Scripture, but that it specifically is a gateway to joy.

"How?", you may ask: "How on earth?" The answer is almost in the text. If you are proud like Narcissus, you will despise others. And if you despise people, it is awfully hard to enjoy their company. But if, "in humiliiy," you "cosnsider other people better than yourself," you will learn respect for others who are made in the image of God, and you will enjoy the company of the worst of sinners. Conflicts may happen, but if we follow the supreme humility of one whose (almost) dying words were a prayer for his murderers, "[Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.](#)" (Is there humility beyond seeing the good, and seeking the good, for the people who are trying to kill you?)

Wishful Thinking

Let's look at a light, seemingly innocuous form of subjectivism: wishful thinking. I wrote of one specific *kind* of wishful thinking:

We have a lot of ways of wishing that God had placed us someplace else, someplace different. One of the most interesting books I've glanced through, but not read, was covered in pink rosy foliage, and said that it was dealing with the #1 cause of unhappiness in women's relationships.

And that #1 cause was a surprise: romantic fantasies. The point was that dreaming up a romantic fantasy and then trying to make it real is a recipe, not for fulfillment, but for heartbreaking disappointment *in circumstances where you could be truly happy*. (When you have your heart set on a fantasy of just how the perfect man will fulfill all your desires and transform your world, no *real* man can seem anything but a disappointing shadow next to your fantasy.)

And I've done worse, with wishing I was in the world of Arthurian legends, and I was somehow a knight with the Holy Grail. [i even wrote a novel out of that silliness](#). At least a happy romance and marriage is a natural enough wish; the Arthurian legends and the Holy Grail are not. And this list of two kinds of wishful thinking leaves a lot out. In [Exotic Golden Ages and Restoring Harmony with Nature: Anatomy of a Passion](#), the passage above continues,

This is not just a point about fantasies in romance. It is also a point that has something to do with technological wonders, secret societies, fascination with the paranormal, Star Trek, World of Warcraft, television, Dungeons and Dragons, sacramental shopping, SecondLife, conspiracy theories, smartphones, daydreams, Halloween, Harry Potter, Wicked, Wicca, The Golden Compass, special effects movies, alienated feminism, radical conservatism, Utopian dreams, political plans to transform the world, and every other way that we tell God, "Sorry, what you have given me is not good enough"—or what is much the same, wish God had given us something quite different.

And on a banal level, wishful thinking is a way to waste more time at work. For programmers, when you write something and it doesn't work, it is not the right thing to try again and hope it will fix itself; the right thing to do is investigate what is wrong and fix it. And I was half-shocked when I paid attention to the time and energy I wasted wishfully trying something out again in the wishful hope it would magically fix itself.

Money and Technology

Dostoevsky, in a quote in [The Brothers Karamazov](#) that I can't immediately trace, makes the point that money is something that people will think is good because it reduces their dependence on their neighbors. And while Alyosha indeed acknowledges that more money means less dependence, he sees this as a bad thing: perhaps it is God's design for people to be dependent on their neighbors and not on sums of money. And this skepticism towards how good money really is is straight from the Bible. To pick one of innumerable quotes, let me cite [the most politically incorrect sermon in history](#):

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon.

Sandwiched between words about money are words about the health of one's spiritual eye, which is darkened if it is greedy or stingy. If, perhaps, it is proud, with such pride as would substitute dependence on money for dependence on one's neighbor.

The Acceleration of Addictiveness

And whatever cautions the Bible makes about money apply fourfold to our technological labyrinth. The Bible has warnings about alcohol when the strongest drink you could get was at 4% alcohol: weaker than most beer. Today we live in a world when if you have access to alcohol you can probably buy hard liquor at 40% alcohol: a strong enough drink that it is drunk with special little shot glasses that are too small to drink anything one would drink to slake thirst. And it's not just alcoholic beverages that are on steroids. There's something about smartphones that is in the same key.

One of the rules at alcohol, whether at 4% or 40%, is that it needs to be used in a discipline of moderation, with restraint. The wrong use is precisely to lay the reins on the horse's neck and just go with the flow. And smartphones, like the matrix of technologies we live in, need to be used with a discipline of restraint and not lay the reins on the horse's neck.

Once in a while we get a clue that texting and driving is as dangerous as drinking and driving, but we have not as a society put much more restraint than that. One may occasionally read in a newspaper that texting is eating away at teen's sleep because the stream of new texts doesn't shut

off at bedtime, but the idea that texting, for instance, should be used in a disciplined way, does not dawn on us as a whole.

It is pride that seeks independence from one's neighbor, and it is pride that seeks independence from one's surroundings by means of technology. Back in the days of Walkmans, a friend's grandmother commented that running with a Walkman is a way of disdainfully detaching yourself from attentiveness to your surroundings: an old tape-eating Walkman was a way to carry your own reality with you. And carrying one's own reality with oneself is in the service of pride, and *not* a good thing.

I once thought of writing "The Luddite's Guide to Technology" and describing how to use technology appropriately. In a word it would have been:

Use technologies in ways that arise from and support spiritual discipline, and do not use technologies in ways that arise from and support pride and other vices, including taking you to an alternate private world.

I stopped my attempt to write it because I was not writing anything particularly good, but I would love to see it written, if only as that summary above.

Plato: The Allegory of the... Flickering Screen?

Someone said that the difference between good and bad literature is that bad literature is used to escape reality, while good literature is used to engage reality. I've said that television is a pack of cigarettes for the mind, but television can be used to check weather and traffic, which is not at all turning on the television and entering a state where your body burns fewer calories than when sleeping. But it's not

just television. I had originally intended to revise Plato's famous "Allegory of the Cave" into [Plato: The Allegory of the Television](#), but I ended with a title of [Plato: The Allegory of the... Flickering Screen?](#) In both cases Plato's lesson is applied twice to bad use of technology in which the user is twice imprisoned and far from [contemplation of God](#). And so much of the value proposition of special effects movies, smartphones, role playing games, video games, and the like is *escape*. Reality isn't good enough, not for the likes of us. We're tripping over the same root again, the root called "pride."

And that's not all.

More could perhaps be said. What has been said about pride and despairing escapism, or pride and Gnosticism, or pride and technology, might as well be said about magic as an attempt to escape reality and enter another reality, however subtle the means. I haven't talked about spellbound fascination with one's own inner world. (The inner world is real, and it contains Heaven and Hell, but you're selling yourself short if you think it's just a place for "Me! Me! Me!" This is much for the same reason one priest says he doesn't like hearing people talking about "my life:" his answer is that there is only one life, meaning God's Life, and either you're in it or you're not.) I have not touched the dizzying abyss of postmodernism as spiritual drunkenness adventure, or a curious attitude towards sex that sees children as its liability and places its goodness in entirely the wrong place. On that last score, see the discussion in [The Most Politically Incorrect Sermon in History: A Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount](#). But perhaps this is enough meditation on evil.

Holy Humility

Is there anything good to be learned? Yes indeed, the humility that opens our eyes to the beauty of God and Creation. St. John of the Ladder asked where humility came from, and wrote only:

Someone discovered in his heart how beautiful humility is, and in his amazement he asked her to reveal her parent's name. Humility smiled, joyous and serene: "Why are you in such a rush to learn the name of my begetter? He has no name, nor will I reveal him to you until you have God as your possession. To Whom be glory forever."

But if pride has served as an opening point, let us close with humility. One picture of humility is illuminated in [Tales From a Magic Monastery](#):

The Crystal Globe

I told the guestmaster I'd like to become a monk.

"What kind of monk?" he asked. "A real monk?"

"Yes," I said.

He poured me a cup of wine. "Here, take this." No sooner had I drunk it than I became aware of a crystal globe forming around me. It began to expand until finally it surrounded him too. This monk, who a minute before had seemed so commonplace, now took on an astonishing beauty. I was struck dumb. After a bit the thought came to me, "Maybe I should tell him how beautiful he is—perhaps he doesn't even

know."

But I really *was* dumb—that wine had burned out my tongue! But so great was my happiness at the sight of such beauty that I thought it was well worth the price of my tongue. When he made me a sign to leave, I turned away, confident that the memory of that beauty would be a joy forever.

But what was my surprise when I found that with each person I met it was the same—as soon as he would pass unwittingly into my crystal globe, I could see his beauty too. And I knew that it was real.

Is this what it means to be a REAL monk—to see the beauty in others and to be silent?

This is holy humility. This is what it means to see the image of God in others. This is what it means to "[in humility count others better than yourself.](#)"

Let us make this our goal.

"Religion and Science" Is Not Just Intelligent Design vs. Evolution

A rude awakening

Early in one systematic theology PhD course at Fordham, the text assigned as theology opened by saying, "Theologians are scientists, and they are every bit as much scientists as people in the so-called 'hard sciences' like physics." Not content with this striking claim, the author announced that she was going to use "a term from science," *thought experiment*, which was never used to mean a *Gedanken* experiment as in physics, but instead meant: if we have an idea for how a society should run, we have to experimentally try out this thought and live with it for a while, because if we don't, we will never know what would have happened. ("*Stick your neck out! What have you got to lose?*"—"Your head?") The clumsiness in this use of "a term from science" was on par with saying that you are going to use "an expression from American English", namely *rabbit food*, and subsequently use "rabbit food" as obviously a term meaning food made with rabbit meat.

In this one article were already two things that were fingernails on a chalkboard to my ears. Empirical sciences are today's prestige disciplines, like philosophy / theology / law in bygone eras, and the claim to be a science seems to inevitably be *how to mediate prestige to oneself and one's own discipline*. When I had earlier run into claims of, "Anthropologists are scientists, and they are every bit as much scientists as people in the so-called 'hard sciences,' like physics," I had winced because the claim struck me as not only annoying and untrue, but self-demeaning. But it simply had not occurred to me that theologians would make such a claim, and when they did, I was not only shocked but embarrassed: why should theology, once acclaimed the queen of scholarly disciplines, now seek prestige by parroting the claim to be every-bit-as-much-a-science-as-the-so-called-"hard-sciences"-like-physics (where "so-called" seemed to always be part of the claim, along with the scare quotes around "hard sciences")? To make my point clearer, I drew what was meant to be a shocking analogy: the claim that theologians are "scientists, and every bit as much as people in the so-called 'hard sciences' like physics" was like trying to defend the dignity of being a woman by saying, "Women are male, and they are just as much male as people who can sire a child."

This "physics envy" looks particularly strange next to the medieval Great Chain of Being as it moved from the highest to the lowest: "God, Angels, Man, Animals, Plants, Rocks, Nothing". Theology is the study of God and Man; no discipline is given a more noble field. And however much other disciplines may have "physics envy", no other discipline looks lower than physics, the science that studies Rocks and Nothing. There may be something pathetic about an anthropologist trying to step up on the pecking order by claiming to be "just as much scientists as people in the so-called 'hard sciences' like physics." Yet on the lips of a theologian, it bears a faint hint of a CEO absurdly saying,

"CEOs are janitors, and they are every bit as much janitors as the people responsible for cleaning wastebaskets."

Furthermore, the endemic claim I saw to introduce a "term from science" was, so far as I could remember:

- *Rarely if ever used in any correct fashion.*

The *one* exception I can remember being Wolfhart Pannenberg's illustration of a point by talking about fields such as one finds in the study of electricity and magnetism: the non-scientist theologians in the room said they were having real trouble understanding the illustration conceptually, which would make it seem somewhat dubious as an *illustration* to help get a point across.

- *Always reflect an effort to claim some of science's prestige.*

I remember the "you're being quaint" smiles I got when I suggested that a point that Pannenberg was trying to make by comparing something to a field as defined in physics, seemed in fact to be a point that could have been much better made by a comparison to the Force from *Star Wars*.

Why the patronizing smiles? The job of the example from physics was to mediate prestige as well as to illustrate a concept that could have been better explained without involving a particularly slippery concept from physics.

A first response

Examples of this kind of "science" abounded, and I was perhaps not wise enough to realize that my clumsy attempts to clarify various misrepresentations of science were perhaps not well received because I was stepping on the Dark and Shameful Secret of Not Being Scientific Enough,

and reminding them of an inferiority they were trying hard to dodge. And my attempts to explain "Not being a scientist does not make you inferior" seemed to have no soil in which to grow. In an attempt to start an online discussion, I wrote a piece called "Rumor Science":

I really wish the theology students I knew would either know a lot more about science, or a lot less, and I really wouldn't consider "a lot less" to be disappointing.

Let me explain why. When I was working on my master's in math, there was one passage in particular that struck me from Ann Wilson Schaef's *Women's Reality: An Emerging Female System*. Perhaps predictably given my being a mathematician in training, it was a remark about numbers, or rather about how people interact with numbers.

The author broke people down into more or less three groups of people. The first—she mentioned artists—was people that can't count to twenty without taking off their shoes. She didn't quite say **that**, but she emphasized artists and other people where math and numbers simply aren't part of their consciousness. They don't buy into the mystique. And they can say, and sincerely mean, that numbers don't measure everything. They aren't seriously tempted to believe otherwise.

The second group—she mentioned business people—consists of people for whom math works. Even if they're not mathematicians, math works for them and does useful things, and they may say that numbers don't measure anything, but it

is well nigh impossible to believe—saying and meaning that numbers don't measure everything is like saying that cars are nice but they can't get you places.

And the third group in the progression? She mentioned scientists, but what she said was that they know math in and out and know it so well that they know its limitations and therefore they can say and mean that numbers don't measure everything. And in the end, even though the "scientist" and the "artist" represent opposite extremes of mathematical competence, they both know there are things numbers can't measure while the second, middle group for mathematical competence are in a position where they expect numbers to do things that numbers can't do.

I was flattered, but I really think it stuck with me for more reasons than just the fact that she included me in one of the "good" groups. There is a sort of *Karate Kid* observation—"Karate is like a road. Know karate, safe. Don't know karate, safe. In the middle, *squash*, like a grape!"—that is relevant to theology and science. It has to do with, among other things, Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, the question of evolution, and the like (perhaps I should mention the second law of thermodynamics). My point in this is not that there is an obligation to "know karate", that theologians need to earn degrees in the sciences before they are qualified to work as theologians, but that there is something perfectly respectable about "don't know karate."

I'd like to start by talking about Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem. Now a lot of people

have heard about Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem. Not many major mathematical theorems have had a Pulitzer prize-winning book written around them (and by the way, *Gödel, Escher, Bach* has been one of my favorite books). Nor do many theorems get summarized in Newsweek as an important theorem which demonstrates that mathematical "proofs" are not certain, but mathematical knowledge is as relative as any other knowledge.

Which is a crass error. The theological equivalent would be to say that Karl Barth's unflattering remarks about "religion" are anti-Christian, or that liberation theology's preferential option for the poor means that special concern for the poor is optional and to be dealt with according to personal preference. And saying that about liberation theology is a theological "squash like a grape," because it is better to not know liberation theology and know you don't know than believe that you understand liberation theology and "know" that the word "option" implies "optional." **It's not what you don't know that hurts you, but what you know that ain't so.**

For the record, what Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem means is that for a certain branch of mathematics, there are things that can be neither proven nor disproven—which made his theorem a shocker when there was a Tower of Babel effort to prove or disprove pretty much anything. It proves that some things can never be proven within certain systems. And it has other implications. But it does *not* mean that things that are proven in mathematics are uncertain, or that mathematical knowledge is relative. It says

you can't prove everything a mathematician would want to prove. But there are still lots and lots and lots of interesting things that can be proven, and Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem does not touch these proofs, nor does it mean that mathematical knowledge is merely relative in humanities fashion.

And I'd like to mention what happens when I mention Gödel's **Completeness** Theorem:

Dead silence.

The same great mathematical logician proved another theorem, which does not have a Pulitzer prize winning book, which says that in one other branch of mathematics, besides the branch that Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem speaks to, you can have pretty much what Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem says you can't have in the other branch. In other words, you can—mechanically, for that matter, which is a big mathematical achievement—either prove or disprove every single statement. I'm not sure it's as important as Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, but it's a major theorem from the same mathematician and no one's heard of it.

There would seem to be obvious non-mathematical reasons for why people would want to be informed about the first theorem and not want to mention the second. I consider it telling (about non-mathematical culture). I know it may be considered a mark of sophistication to mention Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem and share how it's informed your epistemology. But it

hasn't informed my epistemology and I really can't tell how my theology would be different if I hadn't heard of it. And my understanding is that other mathematicians tend not to have the highest view of people who are trying to take account of scientific discoveries that an educated person "should" know. There are other reasons for this, including goofy apologetics that make the famous theorem a proof for God. But I at least would rather talk with someone who simply hadn't heard of the theorem than a theologian who had tried to make a "responsible" effort to learn from the discovery.

And my main example is one I'm less sure how to comment on, and not only because I know less biology than math. There was one almost flippant moment in England when the curate asked if anybody had questions about the upcoming Student Evolution conference that everybody was being urged to attend. I asked, "Is this 'Student Evolution' more of a gradual process, or more a matter of 'punk eek'?" (That question brought down the house.)

Punctuated equilibrium, irreverently abbreviated 'punk eek', is a very interesting modification of Darwinian theory. Darwinian *evolution* in its early forms posits and implies a gradual process of very slow changes—almost constant over very long ("geological") time frames. And that is a beautiful theory that flatly contracts almost all known data.

As explained by my Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy biology teacher, "Evolution is like baseball. It has long stretches of boring time

interrupted by brief periods of intense excitement." That's punk eek in a nutshell, and what interests me most is that it's the mirror image of saying "God created the world—through evolution!" It says, "Evolution occurred—through punctuated equilibrium!"

That's not the only problem; evolution appears to be, in Kuhnian terms (Structure of Scientific Revolutions), a theory "in crisis", which is the Kuhnian term for when a scientific theory is having serious difficulties accounting for currently given data and may well be on its way out the door. There are several ways people are trying to cope with this—preserving some semblance of a materialist explanation; there was the same kind of resistance going on before science acknowledged the Big Bang, because scientists who want a universe without cause and without beginning or creator heard something that sounded too much like "Let there be light!" They're very interesting, and intellectually dishonest.

Now I need to clarify; people seem to think you have to either be a young earth creationist or else admit evolution of some stripe. I believe in 13 billion years as the rough age of the universe, not six thousand years; I also believe in natural selection and something called "micro-evolution." (By the way, JPII's "more than a hypothesis" was in the original French "*plus qu'un hypothèse*", alternately translatable as "more than one hypothesis", and the official Vatican translation takes this reading. One can say that micro-evolution is one of the hypothesis gathered under the heading of evolution.)

I wince when I see theologians trying their dutiful best to work out an obligation to take evolution into account as a proven fact: squash, like a grape. It's not just that science doesn't trade in proof and evolution is being treated like a revelation, as if a Pope had consulted the Pontifical Academy of the Sciences and canonized *The Origin of the Species* as a book of the Bible. Or maybe that's putting it too strongly. It would also be strong language to say that many theologians are adopting a carefully critical attitude to classic Church claims and part of their being critical means placing an embarrassingly blind faith in evolution. But that's truer than I'd want to admit.

What about the second law of thermodynamics?

I don't know what the first and third laws of thermodynamics say, and I can't say that I'm missing anything. I don't feel obligated to make the second law, which I am familiar with, a feature of my theology, but if I did, I would try to understand the first and third laws of thermodynamics, and treat it as physics in which those three laws and presumably other things fit into a system that needs to be treated as a whole. I don't know how I would incorporate that in my theology, but I'm supposing for the sake of argument that I would. I would rather avoid treating it the way people usually seem to treat it when they treat that as one of the things that educated people "should" know.

I guess that my point in all of this is that some people think there's a duty to know science and be scientific in theology, but this is a duty better

shirked. My theology is—or I would like it to be—closer to that of someone who doesn't understand science, period, than that of people who try to improve their theology by incorporating what they can grasp of difficult scientific concepts that the scientists themselves learned with difficulty.

Rumor science is worse than no science, and an ascientific theology is not a handicap. When I say that I would rather see theologians know either much more or much less science, I'm not hoping that theologians will therefore get scientific degrees. The chief merit for a theologian to know science is that it can be a source of liberation that frees people from thinking "We live in a scientific age so it would be better for theology to be scientific." I'm not sure I would be able to question that assumption if I knew much less science. *But what I believe that buys me is not a better theology than someone scientifically innocent but freedom from the perceived need to "take science into account" in my theology so I can do the same kind of theology as someone scientifically innocent.*

I'm not as sure what to say about ecological theology; I wrote [Hymn to the Creator of Heaven and Earth](#) at without scientific reference that I remember, and I believe there are other human ways of knowing Creation besides science. But an ecological theologian who draws on scientific studies is not trying to honor a duty to understand things an educated person should know, but pursuing something materially relevant. Science has some place; religion and science boundary issues are legitimate, and I

don't know I can dissuade people who think it's progressive to try to make a scientific theology—although I really wish people with that interest would get letters after their name from a science discipline, or some other form of genuinely proper scientific credentials appropriate to a genuinely scientific theology.

There are probably other exceptions, and science is interesting. But there is no obligation to go from safely on one side of the road to a position in the middle because it is "closer" to a proper understanding of science. Perhaps liberation theologians want people to understand their cause, but it is better not to pretend to know liberation theology than to approach it in a way that leaves you "knowing" that the preferential option is optional. *It isn't what you know that hurts you, but what you know that ain't so*—and rumor science, with its accepted list of important scientific knowledge that scholars need to take into account, is one way to learn from what ain't so.

Science is the prestige discipline(s) today; you see psychology wishing for its Newton to lead it into the promised land of being a science in the fullest sense of the term. You don't see psychology pining for a Shakespeare to lead it into the promised land of being a humanity in the fullest sense of the term. And the social disciplines—I intentionally do not say social **sciences** because they are legitimate academic disciplines but not sciences—are constantly insisting that their members are scientists, but *the claim that theologians are scientists annoys me as a scientist and almost offends me as a*

theologian. It should be offensive for much the same reason that it should be offensive to insist on female dignity by claiming that women are really male, and that they are just as much male as people who can sire a child.

It would be an interesting theological work to analyze today's cultural assumptions surrounding science, which are quite important and not dictated by scientific knowledge itself, and then come to almost the same freedom as someone innocent of science.

"My theology," *ewwww*. (While I was at it, why didn't I discuss plans for my own private sun and moon? I'm *not* proud of proudly discussing "my theology".) I know the text has a wart or two.

But the piece contains a suggestion: "rumor science" may be a red flag to a real problem in the place we give science.

Pondering Einstein, or at least dropping his name

That work left out the crowning jewel of scientific theories to ponder in "rumor science": Einstein's "theory of relativity." Some time later, in my science fiction short story / Socratic dialogue, [The Steel Orb](#), I wrote in fiction something that picked up what I had left out:

Art sat back. "I'd be surprised if you're not a real scientist. I imagine that in your world you know things that our scientists will not know for centuries."

Oinos sat back and sat still for a time, closing his eyes. Then he opened his eyes and said, "What

have you learned from science?"

"I've spent a lot of time lately, wondering what Einstein's theory of relativity means for us today: even the 'hard' sciences are relative, and what 'reality' is, depends greatly on your own perspective. Even in the hardest sciences, it is fundamentally mistaken to be looking for absolute truth."

Oinos leaned forward, paused, and then tapped the table four different places. In front of Art appeared a gridlike object which Art recognized with a start as a scientific calculator like his son's. "Very well. Let me ask you a question. Relative to your frame of reference, an object of one kilogram rest mass is moving away from you at a speed of one tenth the speed of light. What, from your present frame of reference, is its effective mass?"

Art hesitated, and began to sit up.

Oinos said, "If you'd prefer, the table can be set to function as any major brand of calculator you're familiar with. Or would you prefer a computer with Matlab or Mathematica? The remainder of the table's surface can be used to browse the appropriate manuals."

Art shrunk slightly towards his chair.

Oinos said, "I'll give you hints. In the theory of relativity, objects can have an effective mass of above their rest mass, but never below it. Furthermore, most calculations of this type tend

to have anything that changes, change by a factor of the inverse of the square root of the quantity: one minus the square of the object's speed divided by the square of the speed of light. Do you need me to explain the buttons on the calculator?"

Art shrunk into his chair. "I don't know all of those technical details, but I have spent a lot of time thinking about relativity."

Oinos said, "If you are unable to answer that question before I started dropping hints, let alone after I gave hints, you should not pose as having contemplated what relativity means for us today. I'm not trying to humiliate you. But the first question I asked is the kind of question a teacher would put on a quiz to see if students were awake and not playing video games for most of the first lecture. I know it's fashionable in your world to drop Einstein's name as someone you have deeply pondered. It is also extraordinarily silly. I have noticed that scientists who have a good understanding of relativity often work without presenting themselves as having these deep ponderings about what Einstein means for them today. Trying to deeply ponder Einstein without learning even the basics of relativistic physics is like trying to write the next Nobel prize-winning German novel without being bothered to learn even them most rudimentary German vocabulary and grammar."

"But don't you think that relativity makes a big difference?"

"On a poetic level, I think it is an interesting development in your world's history for a breakthrough in science, Einstein's theory of relativity, to say that what is absolute is not time, but light. Space and time bend before light. There is a poetic beauty to Einstein making an unprecedented absolute out of light. But let us leave poetic appreciation of Einstein's theory aside.

"You might be interested to know that the differences predicted by Einstein's theory of relativity are so minute that decades passed between Einstein making the theory of relativity and people being able to use a sensitive enough clock to measure the microscopically small difference of the so-called 'twins paradox' by bringing an atomic clock on an airplane. The answer to the problem I gave you is that for a tenth the speed of light—which is faster than you can imagine, and well over a thousand times the top speed of the fastest supersonic vehicle your world will ever make—is one half of one percent. It's a disappointingly small increase for a rather astounding speed. If the supersonic Skylon is ever built, would you care to guess the increase in effective mass as it travels at an astounding Mach 5.5?"

"Um, I don't know..."

"Can you guess? Half its mass? The mass of a car? Or just the mass of a normal-sized adult?"

"Is this a trick question? Fifty pounds?"

"The effective mass increases above the rest mass, for that massive vehicle running at about five times the speed of sound and almost twice the top speed of the SR-71 Blackbird, is something like the mass of a mosquito."

"A *mosquito*? You're joking, right?"

"No. It's an underwhelming, *microscopic* difference for what relativity says when the rumor mill has it that Einstein taught us that hard sciences are as fuzzy as anything else... or that perhaps, in Star Wars terms, 'Luke, you're going to find that many of the truths we cling to depend greatly on your own point of view.' Under Einstein, you will in fact **not** find that many of the observations that we cling to, depend greatly on your own frame of reference. You have to be doing something pretty exotic to have relativity make any measurable difference from the older physics at all."

"Rumor science": The tip of an iceberg?

But I would like to get on to something that is of far greater concern than "rumor science" as it treats Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, the second law of thermodynamics, relativity, evolution, and so on. If the only problem was making a bit of a hash of some scientific theories, that would be one thing. But "rumor science" may be the tip of an iceberg, a telling clue that something may be seriously amiss in how theology has been relating to science. There is another, far more serious boundary issue.

There is something about the nature of academic theology

today that may become clearer if we ask questions about the nature of knowledge and line up academic theology with Orthodoxy on the one hand and modern science on the other. The table below lists a few questions connected with knowledge, and then a comparison between Orthodox Christianity, academic theology, and modern science in their own columns:

Question	Orthodox Christianity	Academic Theology	Modern Science
<i>What is knowledge like?</i>	"Adam knew Eve..." The primary word in the Old and New Testaments for sexual union is in fact 'know', and this is a significant clue about the intimate nature of knowledge. Knowledge is, at its core, the knowledge that drinks. It connects at a deepest level, and is cognate to how Orthodox say of the Holy Mysteries, "We have seen the	Knowledge is <i>critical</i> , <i>detached</i> : the privileged position is of the outsider who stands clear of a situation and looks into a window. The devout believer enjoys no real advantage in grasping his religion compared to the methodical observer who remains detached—and the ordinary	You can't know how stars age or the limitations of the ideal gas law from direct personal experience. Science stems from a rationalism cognate to the Enlightenment, and even if one rebels against the Enlightenment, it's awfully hard to know quarks and leptons solely by the intimacy of personal experience.

<i>Question</i>	Orthodox Christianity	Academic Theology	Modern Science
	true Light!": to receive the Eucharist is to know.	believer may be at a marked <i>disadvantage</i> .	
<i>What aspect of yourself do you know with?</i>	This may not be part of the standard Western picture, but the Orthodox, non-materialist understanding of mind holds that there is a sort of "spiritual eye" which knows and which grasps spiritual realities as overflow to its central purpose of worshiping God. The center of gravity for knowing is this spiritual eye, and it is the center of a	Good scholarship comes from putting all other aspects of the person in their place and enthroning the part of us that reasons logically and almost putting the logic bit on steroids. Continental philosophy may rebel against this, but it rebels after starting from this point.	We have a slightly more rigorous use of primarily logical reasoning and a subject domain that allows this reasoning to shine.

Question	Orthodox Christianity	Academic Theology	Modern Science
	<p>whole and integrated person. Logical and other "discursive" reasoning may have a place, but the seat of this kind of reasoning is a moon next to the light of the sun which is the spiritual eye, the <i>nous</i>.</p>		
<p><i>What should teachers cultivate in their students?</i></p>	<p>Teachers should induce students into <i>discipleship</i> and should be exemplary disciples themselves.</p>	<p>They should train students who will not be content with their teachers' interpretations but push past to their own takes on the matter.</p>	<p>They should train students to develop experiments and theories to carefully challenge the "present working picture" in their field.</p>
<p><i>What is tradition, and how does your tradition relate to</i></p>	<p>One may be not so much <i>under Tradition</i> as <i>in Tradition</i>: Tradition is</p>	<p>Something of the attitude is captured in what followed the telling of an anecdote</p>	<p>As Nobel prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman observed, "You</p>

<i>Question</i>	Orthodox Christianity	Academic Theology	Modern Science
<i>knowing?</i>	<p>like one's culture or language, if a culture and language breathed on by the Holy Spirit of God. Though the matrix of Tradition need not be viewed with legalistic fundamentalism, it is missing something important to fail to love and revere Tradition as something of a mother.</p>	<p>about a New Testament Greek class where the professor had difficulties telling how to read a short text, until a classics student looked and suggested that the difficulty would evaporate if the text were read with a different set of accents from what scholars traditionally assigned it. The Greek professor's response ("Accents are not inspired!") was presented by the academic</p>	<p>get to be part of the establishment by blowing up part of the establishment."</p>

<i>Question</i>	Orthodox Christianity	Academic Theology	Modern Science
		<p>theologian retelling this story as full warrant to suggest that scholars should not view themselves as bound by tradition with its blind spots.</p>	
<p><i>How much emphasis do you place on creativity?</i></p>	<p>It reflects some degree of fundamental confusion to measure the value of what someone says by how original it is. That which is true is not original, and that which is original is not true. Perhaps people may uncover new layers of meaning, but to measure</p>	<p>Publish something <i>original</i>, or perish. Better to say something original but not true than not have any ideas to claim as "mine." If need be, rehabilitate Arius or Nestorius. (Or, if you are Orthodox, meet current fashions halfway and</p>	<p>Continue to push the envelope. Are you an experimental physicist? If you cannot observe anything new by the layman's means of observation, pioneer new equipment or a clever experiment to push the envelope of what can be observed.</p>

Question	Orthodox Christianity	Academic Theology	Modern Science
	someone by how many ideas he can claim as "mine" is a strange measure.	show that St. Augustine need not be a whipping boy.)	Publish something <i>original</i> or perish.
<i>Where does your discipline place its empiricism?</i>	There is a very real sense of empiricism, albeit a sense that has very little directly to do with empirical science. Knowledge is what you know through the "spiritual eye" and it is a knowledge that can only be realized through direct participation. An "idle word" may be a word of that which you do not have this knowledge of, and this sin	Theologians are just as empirical as physicists, whether or not they know basic statistics. We have such quasi-scientific empiricism as can be had for the human and divine domain we cover; there is a great deal of diversity, and some of us do not place much emphasis on the empiricism of science, but	As much as theology's empiricism is the empiricism of a knowledge of the "spiritual eye" and the whole person, our empiricism is an empiricism of detached, careful, methodical, reasoned investigation— the investigation of the reasoning faculty on steroids. Our science exhibits professionalism and a particular vision of

<i>Question</i>	Orthodox Christianity	Academic Theology	Modern Science
	<p>would appear to be foundational to the empiricism of science. We really do have an empiricism, but it might be better not to engender pointless confusion by claiming to be empirical when the empiricism known to the academy is pre-eminently that of empirical science, whether it is either actual or aspiring science.</p>	<p>some of us have enough of scientific empiricism to do history work that stands its ground when judged by secular history's standards.</p>	<p>intellectual virtue. Our empiricism corresponds to this vision, and no one has pushed this empiricism of the reasoning faculty further, and the unique technology founded on science is a testament to how far we have pushed this kind of empiricism.</p>

When they are lined up, academic theology appears to have a great many continuities with science and a real disconnect with Orthodox Christianity. Could academic theologians feel an inferiority complex about Not Being Scientific Enough? Absolutely. But the actual problem may be that they are entirely *too* scientific. I am less concerned that their theology is not sufficiently scientific than that it is not

sufficiently *theological*.

Origins questions: can we dig deeper?

It is along those lines that I have taken something of the track of "join the enemy's camp to show its weaknesses from within" in exposing the blind spots of Darwinism, for instance. In the theologically driven short story [The Commentary](#), the issue is not really whether Darwinism is correct at all. The question is not whether we should be content with Darwinian answers, but whether we should be content with Darwinian *questions*.

Martin stepped into his house and decided to have no more distractions. He wanted to begin reading commentary, now. He opened the book on the table and sat erect in his chair:

Genesis

1:1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

1:2 The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

1:3 And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

The reader is now thinking about evolution. He is wondering whether

Genesis 1 is right, and evolution is simply wrong, or whether evolution is right, and Genesis 1 is a myth that may be inspiring enough but does not actually tell how the world was created.

All of this is because of a culture phenomenally influenced by scientism and science. The theory of evolution is an attempt to map out, in terms appropriate to scientific dialogue, just what organisms occurred, when, and what mechanism led there to be new kinds of organisms that did not exist before. Therefore, nearly all Evangelicals assumed, Genesis 1 must be the Christian substitute for evolution. Its purpose must also be to map out what occurred when, to provide the same sort of mechanism. In short, if Genesis 1 is true, then it must be trying to answer the same question as evolution, only answering it differently.

Darwinian evolution is not a true answer to the question, "Why is there life as we know it?" Evolution is on philosophical grounds *not* a true answer to that question, because it is not an answer to that question at all. Even if it is true, evolution is only an answer to the question, "*How* is there life as we know it?" If someone asks, "Why is there this life that we see?" and someone answers, "Evolution," it

is like someone saying, "Why is the kitchen light on?" and someone else answering, "Because the switch is in the on position, thereby closing the electrical circuit and allowing current to flow through the bulb, which grows hot and produces light."

Where the reader only sees one question, an ancient reader saw at least two other questions that are invisible to the present reader. As well as the question of "How?" that evolution addresses, there is the question of "Why?" and "What function does it serve?" These two questions are very important, and are not even considered when people are only trying to work out the antagonism between creationism and evolutionism.

Martin took a deep breath. Was the text advocating a six-day creationism? That was hard to tell. He felt uncomfortable, in a much deeper way than if Bible-thumpers were preaching to him that evolutionists would burn in Hell.

There is a hint here of why some people who do not believe in a young earth are no less concerned about young earth creationism: the concern is not exactly that it is junk science, but precisely that it is *too* scientific, assuming many of evolutionary theory's blindnesses even as it asserts the full literal truth of the Bible in answering questions on the terms of what science asks of an origins theory.

There is an Dilbert strip which goes as follows:

Pointy-haired boss: I'm sending you to Elbonia to teach a class on Cobol on Thursday.

Dilbert: But I don't know Cobol. Can't you ask Wally? He knows Cobol!

Pointy-haired boss: I already checked, and he's busy on Thursday.

Dilbert: Can't you reschedule?

Pointy-haired boss: Ok, are you free on Tuesday?

Dilbert: You're answering the wrong question!

Dilbert's mortified, "You're answering the wrong question!" has some slight relevance the issues of religion and science: in my homily, [Two Decisive Moments](#) I tried to ask people to look, and aim, *higher*:

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

There is a classic Monty Python "game show": the moderator asks one of the contestants the second question: "In what year did Coventry City last win the English Cup?" The contestant looks at him with a blank stare, and then he opens the question up to the other contestants: "Anyone? In what year did Coventry City last win the English Cup?" And there is dead silence, until the moderator says, "Now, I'm not surprised that none of you got that. It is in fact a trick question. Coventry City has *never* won the English Cup."

I'd like to dig into another trick question: "When was the world created: 13.7 billion years ago, or about six thousand years ago?" The answer in fact is "Neither," but it takes some explaining to get to the point of realizing that the world was created 3:00 PM, March 25, 28 AD.

Adam fell and dragged down the whole realm of nature. God had and has every authority to repudiate Adam, to destroy him, but in fact God did something different. He called Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Elijah, and in the fullness of time he didn't just call a prophet; he sent his Son to become a prophet and more.

It's possible to say something that means more than you realize. Caiaphas, the high priest, did this when he said, "It is better that one man be killed than that the whole nation perish." (John 11:50) This also happened when Pilate sent Christ out, flogged, clothed in a purple robe, and said, "*Behold the man!*"

What does this mean? It means more than Pilate could have possibly dreamed of, and "Adam" means "man": *Behold the man! Behold Adam, but not the Adam who sinned against God and dragged down the Creation in his rebellion, but the second Adam, the new Adam, the last Adam, who obeyed God and exalted the whole Creation in his rising. Behold the man, Adam as he was meant to be. Behold the New Adam who is even now transforming the Old Adam's failure into glory!*

Behold the man! Behold the first-born of the

dead. Behold, as in the icon of the Resurrection, the man who descends to reach Adam and Eve and raise them up in his ascent. Behold the man who will enter the realm of the dead and forever crush death's power to keep people down.

*Behold the man and behold the firstborn of many brothers! You may know the great chapter on faith, chapter 11 of the book of Hebrews, and it is with good reason one of the most-loved chapters in the Bible, but it is not the only thing in Hebrews. The book of Hebrews looks at things people were caught up in, from the glory of angels to sacrifices and the Mosaic Law, and underscores how much more the Son excels above them. A little before the passage we read above, we see, "To which of the angels did he ever say, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you'?" (Hebrews 1:5) And yet in John's prologue we read, "To those who received him and believed in his name, he gave the authority to become the children of God." (John 1:9) We also read today, "To which of the angels did he ever say, 'Sit at my right hand until I have made your enemies a footstool under your feet?'" (Hebrews 1:13) And yet Paul encourages us: "The God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet," (Romans 16:20) and elsewhere asks bickering Christians, "Do you not know that we will judge angels?" (I Corinthians 6:3) *Behold the man! Behold the firstborn of many brothers, the Son of God who became a man so that men might become the Sons of God. Behold the One who became what we are that we might by grace become what he is. Behold the supreme exemplar of what it means to be Christian.**

Behold the man and behold the first-born of all Creation, through whom and by whom all things were made! Behold the Uncreated Son of God who has entered the Creation and forever transformed what it means to be a creature! Behold the Saviour of the whole Creation, the Victor who will return to Heaven bearing as trophies not merely his transfigured saints but the whole Creation! Behold the One by whom and through whom all things were created! Behold the man!

Pontius Pilate spoke words that were deeper than he could have **possibly** imagined. And Christ continued walking the fateful journey before him, continued walking to the place of the Skull, Golgotha, and finally struggled to breathe, his arms stretched out as far as love would go, and barely gasped out, "It is finished."

Then and there, the entire work of Creation, which we read about from Genesis onwards, was *complete*. There and no other place the world was created, at 3:00 PM, March 25, 28 AD. *Then* the world was created.

I wince at the idea that for theologians "boundary issues" are mostly about demonstrating the compatibility of timeless revealed truths to the day's state of flux in scientific speculation. I wince that theologians so often assume that the biggest contribution they can give to the dialogue between theology and science is the rubber stamp of perennially agreeing with science. I would decisively prefer that when theologians "approach religion and science boundary issues," we do so as boundaries are understood in pop psychology—and more specifically *bad* pop psychology—which is all about you cannot meaningfully say "Yes" until

it is your practice to say "No" when you should say "No": what theology needs in its boundaries with science is not primarily a question of what else we should seek to embrace, but of where theology has ingested things toxic to its constitution.

What gets lost when theology loses track (by which I do not mean primarily rumor science, but the three columns where theology seemed a colony of science that had lost touch with Orthodox faith) is that when theology assumes the character of science, it loses the character of theology.

The research for my diploma thesis at Cambridge had me read a lot of historical-critical commentary on a relevant passage; I read everything I could find on the topic in Tyndale House's specialized library, and something became painfully obvious. When a good Protestant sermon uses historical or cultural context to illuminate a passage from Scripture, the preacher has sifted through pearls amidst sand, and the impression that cultural context offers a motherlode of gold to enrich our understanding of the Bible is quite contrary to the historical-critical commentaries I read, which read almost like phone books in their records of details I'd have to stretch to use to illuminate the passage. The pastor's discussion of context in a sermon is something like an archivist who goes into a scholar's office, pulls an unexpected book, shows that it is surprisingly careworn and dog-eared, and discusses how the three longest underlined passage illuminate the scholar's output. But the historical-critical commentary itself is like an archivist who describes in excruciating detail the furniture and ornaments in the author's office and the statistics about the size and weight among books the scholar owned in reams of (largely uninterpreted) detail.

And what is lost in this careful scholarship? Perhaps what is lost is why we have Bible scholarship in the first place: it is a divinely given book and a support to life in Christ. If

historical-critical scholarship is your (quasi-scientific) approach to theology, you won't seek in your scholarship what I sought in writing my (non-scientific) [Doxology](#):

How shall I praise thee, O Lord?
 For naught that I might say,
 Nor aught that I may do,
 Compareth to thy worth.
 Thou art the Father for whom every fatherhood
 in Heaven and on earth is named,
 The Glory for whom all glory is named,
 The Treasure for whom treasures are named,
 The Light for whom all light is named,
 The Love for whom all love is named,
 The Eternal by whom all may glimpse eternity,
 The Being by whom all beings exist,
 יהוה,
 O ΩN.
 The King of Kings and Lord of Lords,
 Who art eternally praised,
 Who art all that thou canst be,
 Greater than aught else that may be thought,
 Greater than can be thought.
 In thee is light,
 In thee is honour,
 In thee is mercy,
 In thee is wisdom, and praise, and every good
 thing.
 For good itself is named after thee,
 God immeasurable, immortal, eternal, ever
 glorious, and humble.
 What mighteth compare to thee?
 What praise equalleth thee?
 If I be fearfully and wonderfully made,
 Only can it be,
 Wherewith thou art fearful and wonderful,
 And ten thousand things besides,

Thou who art One,
 Eternally beyond time,
 So wholly One,
 That thou mayest be called infinite,
 Timeless beyond time thou art,
 The One who is greater than infinity art thou.
 Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
 The Three who are One,
 No more bound by numbers than by word,
 And yet the Son is called Ο ΛΟΓΟΣ,
 The Word,
 Divine ordering Reason,
 Eternal Light and Cosmic Word,
 Way pre-eminent of all things,
 Beyond all, and infinitesimally close,
 Thou transcendest transcendence itself,
 The Creator entered into his Creation,
 Sharing with us humble glory,
 Lowered by love,
 Raised to the highest,
 The Suffering Servant known,
 The King of Glory,
 Ο ΩΝ.

What tongue mighteth sing of thee?
 What noetic heart mighteth know thee,
 With the knowledge that drinketh,
 The drinking that knoweth,
 Of the νοϋς,
 The loving, enlightened spiritual eye,
 By which we may share the knowing,
 Of divinised men joining rank on rank of angel.

Thou art,
 The Hidden Transcendent God who transcendest
 transcendence itself,
 The One God who transfigurest Creation,

The Son of God became a Man that men might
 become the sons of God,
 The divine became man that man mighteth
 become divine.

Monty Python and Christian theology

I would like to start winding down with a less uplifting note. A few years back, I visited a friend who was a Christian and a big Monty Python fan and played for me a Monty Python clip:

God: Arthur! Arthur, King of the Britons!
 Oh, don't grovel! If there's one thing
 I can't stand, it's people groveling.

Arthur: Sorry—

God: And don't apologize. Every time I try
 to talk to someone it's 'sorry this' and
 'forgive me that' and 'I'm not worthy'.
 What are you doing now!?

Arthur: I'm averting my eyes, O Lord.

God: Well, don't. It's like those miserable
 Psalms—they're so depressing. Now
 knock it off!

This is blasphemous, and I tried to keep my mouth shut about what my host had presented to me, I thought, for my rollicking laughter. But subsequent conversation showed I had misjudged his intent: he had not intended it to be shockingly funny.

He had, in fact, played the clip because it was something that he worried about: did God, in fact, want to give grumbling complaints about moments when my friend cried out to him in prayer? Does prayer annoy our Lord as an unwelcome intrusion from people who should have a little dignity and leave him alone or at least quit sniveling?

This is much more disturbing than merely playing the clip because you find it funny to imagine God bitterly kvetching when King Arthur tries to show him some respect. If it is actually taken as theology, Monty Python is really sad.

And it is not the best thing to be involved in Monty Python as theology.

One can whimsically imagine an interlocutor encountering some of the theology I have seen and trying to generously receive it in the best of humor: "A book that promises scientific theology in its title and goes on for a thousand pages of trajectories for other people to follow before a conclusion that apologizes for not actually getting on to any theology? *You have a real sense of humor!* Try to avoid imposing Christianity on others and start from the common ground of what all traditions across the world have in common, that non-sectarian common ground being the Western tradition of analytic philosophy? *Roaringly funny!* Run a theological anthropology course that tells how liberationists, feminists, queer theorists, post-colonialists, and so on have to say to the Christian tradition and does not begin to investigate what the Christian tradition has to say to them? *You should have been a comedian!* Yoke St. Gregory of Nyssa together with a lesbian deconstructionist like Judith Butler to advance the feminist agenda of gender fluidity? *You're really giving Monty Python a run for their money!*" ... until it gradually dawns on our interlocutor that the lewd discussion of sexual theology is not in any sense meant as an attempt to eclipse Monty Python. (Would our interlocutor spend the night weeping for lost sheep without

a shepherd?)

There are many more benign examples of academic theology; many of even the problems may be slightly less striking. But theology that gives the impression that it could be from Monty Python is a bit of a dead (coal miner's) canary.

Scientific theology does not appear to be blame for all of these, but it is not irrelevant. Problems that are not directly tied to (oxymoronic) scientific theology are usually a complication of (oxymoronic) secular theology, and scientific theology and secular theology are deeply enough intertwined.

The question of evolution is important, and it is no error that a figure like Philip Johnson gives neo-Darwinian evolution pride of place in assessing materialist attacks on religion. But it is not an adequate remedy to merely study intelligent design. Not enough by half.

If theology could, like bad pop psychology, conceive of its "boundary issues" not just in terms of saying "Yes" but of learning to stop saying "Yes" when it should say "No", this would be a great gain. So far as I have seen, the questions about boundaries with science are primarily not scientific ideas theology needs to assimilate, but ways theology has assimilated some very deep characteristics of science that are *not* to its advantage. The question is less about what more could be added, than what more could be taken away. And the best way to do this is less the Western cottage industry of worldview construction than a journey of repentance such as one still finds preached in Eastern Christianity and a good deal of Christianity in the West.

A journey of repentance

Repentance is Heaven's best-kept secret. Repentance has been called unconditional surrender, and it has been called

the ultimate experience to fear. But when you surrender what you thought was your ornament and joy, you realize, "I was holding on to a piece of Hell!" And with letting go comes hands that are free to grasp joy you never thought to ask. Forgiveness is letting go of the other person and finding it is yourself you have set free; repentance is being terrified of letting go and then finding you have let go of needless pain. Repentance is indeed Heaven's best-kept secret; it opens doors.

I have doubt whether academic theology will open the door of repentance; it is a beginner's error to be the student who rushes in to single-handedly sort out what a number of devout Christian theologians see no way to fix. But as for theologians, the door of repentance is ever ready to open, and with it everything that the discipline of theology seeks in vain here using theories from the humanities, there trying to mediate prestige to itself science. Academic theologians who are, or who become, theologians in a more ancient sense find tremendous doors of beauty and joy open to them. The wondrous poetry of St. Ephrem the Syrian is ever open; the liturgy of the Church is open; the deifying rays of divine grace shine ever down upon those open to receiving them and upon those not yet open. The Western understanding is that the door to the Middle Ages has long since been closed and the age of the Church Fathers was closed much earlier; but Orthodox will let you become a Church Father, here now. Faithful people today submit as best they are able to the Fathers before them, as St. Maximus Confessor did ages ago. There may be problems with academic theology today, but the door to theology in the classic sense is never closed, as in the maxim that has rumbled through the ages, "A theologian is one who prays, and one who prays is a theologian." Perhaps academic theology is not the best place to be equipped to be a giant like the saintly theologians of ages past. But that does not mean that one cannot become a saintly theologian as in

ages past. God can still work with us, here now.

To quote St. Dionysius (pseudo-Dionysius) in [The Mystical Theology](#),

Trinity! Higher than any being,
any divinity, any goodness!
Guide of Christians
in the wisdom of Heaven!
Lead us up beyond unknowing light,
up to the farthest, highest peak
of mystic scripture,
where the mysteries of God's Word
lie simple, absolute and unchangeable
in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.
Amid the deepest shadow
They pour overwhelming light
on what is most manifest.
Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen
They completely fill our sightless minds
with treasures beyond all beauty.

Let us ever seek the theology of living faith!

The Swiss Army Knife and God

The great Swiss Army Knife and its kin

It has become fashionable to say a bit of nuance when something is compared to a Swiss Army Knife: a Swiss Army Knife is a collection of second-rate tools: the can opener may be better than nothing, but it is a surrogate for a real can opener. At least it seems to be sophisticated nuance, but I write after having opened a can with my Swiss Army Knife when a "real" can opener was right in the drawer in front of me.

A spider's web is small, flimsy, easy to overlook, and in houses something people sweep away as a nuisance. Yet none of these faults are brought to mind when something is compared to the world wide web, or someone discussing history compares the 19th century establishment of nationwide railways crossing the U.S. to the establishment of the web. For that matter, there is a positive connotation to the spider's web that we do not evoke: a spider's web is what provides spiders something to eat, and some of us

(including yours truly) are privileged to make a living from the web. The web is an intricate mesh of cross-linking, and the idea of one node connected to the other is the prime metaphor evoked when we speak of the "web."

I carry four Swiss Army Knives, or at least material Swiss Army Knives, besides my wallet.

The first is [a Swisschamp my parents got for me in England](#) when we traveled when I was a teen, and I've made a couple of custom modifications to it: I filed away at part of the metal saw/nail file/metal file to make a harder-than-steel blade for cutting at screens, and I also narrowed the end of the tweezers to try and make it work better as a splinter tweezers. I've stopped carrying it once or twice, but so far at least I have gotten back to carrying it again. I know its features by heart: large blade, small blade, metal saw, metal file, nail file, nail cleaner, added harder-than-steel blade, wood saw, scissors, magnifying glass, Phillips screwdriver, pliers, large slotted screwdriver, can opener, wire stripper, small slotted screwdriver, can opener, corkscrew, jeweler's screwdriver, pin, wood chisel, additional slotted screwdriver, hook, reamer, pen, toothpick, tweezers (sadly replaced with a regular tweezers when I sent it in for repairs—I'm sure they meant it well).

The second Swiss Army Knife I carry is one that I purchased in a moment of "sacramental shopping" against my best judgment: my watch was having problems, but I already had a perfectly useful way to tell time. I had quite vulgarly agreed with the contents of my spam folder to believe that I needed an extra special watch and it would make me special. And so I purchased a [Casio Pathfinder watch](#), water resistant to 100 meters, and besides the normal time, five alarms, stopwatch, and timer one might expect of a digital watch, it has a compass, barometer/altimeter, a surprisingly useless thermometer, tells time in other time zones, is set each night by a signal from an atomic clock and is probably

within a second of the "official" absolute time without my ever setting it, and recharges by solar power even when I do nothing to make sure it gets light. It has never been below the highest level of charge. Oh, and its color is a military olive green with black highlight, so it fits in with my green and earth tone wardrobe. I have, as it turns out, used the compass, and I do hope it lasts me a while, but I regard the purchase as an ersatz sacrament, vulgar as a "replica luxury watch" hawked in spam.

The third Swiss Army Knife I carry is an iPhone: I upgraded in the recent past from my iPhone 1 to an iPhone 4 because AT&T's rate limiting was getting to be a quite practical limitation; sending a thank-you note after a job interview was like breathing through a straw. I have not upgraded to the 4 S; it sounds impressive, but my present iPhone 4 works as nicely today as when I got it, good enough that the fact that something better is out there does not concern me.

(No, not Android; I've tried Android and didn't like it. I've wished I knew enough video editing to take one of the initial commercials, which said things like "iDon't have a real keyboard", to say all but the last "iDon't", and then edit in, "iDon't have a second-rate user interface," and then let the commercial give its final, "Droid does!")

My fourth Swiss Army Knife, which I use rarely, is/was (it is lost now) an Ubuntu USB key: it can store files and it can boot (or install) Ubuntu Linux. While I use thend as someone answered a forum question, "I've installed Linux, now where I can get some games," and answered, "Linux is the game!" other three Swiss Army Knives all the time, this one is there but there are not too many situations to use it. I did install Linux at a friend's house when he requested it and there was no question of going somewhere else to get media, but the way life moves today I spend little time using it; there may be students storing all their homework on a USB key, but I don't find myself using it often.

The good thing about a Swiss Army knife or especially iPhone is that it somewhat allows you to carry your own world around with you—or is it? That carrying your own world and being somewhat independent of your surroundings bears an uncanny resemblance to the demon that is called pride. A Swiss Army Knife might not be as good as the mystique would have it: we have the opposite of the monastic maxim, "Your cell [and surroundings] will teach you everything you need to know."

Part of the reasons people compare things to Swiss Army Knives (and call Perl "Unix's Swiss Army Chainsaw", Python being a lightsabre that cuts like a hot knife through butter), is that there is a mystique to this one bit of Swiss machinecraft that can do so many things. As a relatively young boy, I believe after addictively watching MacGyver, I was asked what I wanted for Christmas and said I wanted a Swiss Army Knife, and my Mom, who would not have been making the choice out of financial constraint, purchased me a wooden-handled pocketknife with two (literal) blades, and said, "See, I got you a Swiss Army Knife!" I tried to contain my disappointment; it was as if I had asked for a bacon cheeseburger, and imagined a good sit-down restaurant bacon cheeseburger piled high with toppings, and was told in perfect sincerity, "Here's the hamburger you asked for," and been given a tiny White Castle burger.

It was perhaps out of this experience that I made a purchase for a boy at church: his parents had told him, perhaps not strangely, that he could own a pocketknife (I believe he owns a couple), but he could not carry anything dangerous. I think sometime back I had given him a vaguely Swiss Army-like folding tool, but more recently I found out there was [a Leatherman expressly designed to be able to be taken through airport security](#), having been cleared approval with the TSA and 315 airports, and they had rather ingeniously made a mechanical folding pliers that was a bit small, but folded out to a pliers, scissors, nail file, carabiner, and (I

believe) a screwdriver designed to work with either slotted or Phillips screws, and a tweezers, but all of this without being like a weapon. And he thanked me for it, once initially as one would expect from politeness, and once a week later (and he showed me its features!). The gift had scored home with him, and I believe my actions were conditioned (though I did not think of it at the time) by my disappointment when my parents admittedly entrusted me with a blade, but did not give the abounding mechanical clockwork-like coolness that motivated my request for a Swiss Army Knife.

Is Orthodoxy a Swiss Army Knife? (Is God?)

The liturgical flow of day and year is intricate, with its ebb and flow and nooks and crannies, and the exact combination of songs, musical tones, readings, and so on for a Divine Liturgy are something that may not be exactly repeated for hundreds of years. And a certain sense you can say that God is a Swiss Army Knife, and the saints are his blades—or, really, the whole race of mankind.

But on a deeper level the image does not fit, and here we run into a basic difficulty in theology. There are two basic modes of theology in talking about God, and they are opposite. One mode, the *cataphatic*, is to say that God is described by the images of his Creation, that he is King and Father, and so on. And there is some element of truth even in comparing HE WHO IS to solid stone: "[Blessed be my rock](#)," the Psalmist bard proclaims. But in a deeper sense these images all ultimately fail, as loudly proclaims *apophatic* theology. The image of God as stone fails more quickly, but ultimately even the images of a Father and King run dry.

And HE WHO IS, one God in Trinity, is utterly and

completely simple, and simple beyond any created simplicity. The beauty of a Swiss Army Knife is that it is many things folded into its handle; it is a beauty of multiplicity that falls infinitely short of God. God may be seen in many saints, but they are all brought to his oneness. And this oneness reflects down: the virtues may look like a Swiss Army Knife of the soul, and they indeed are in a certain sense, but on a more profound level there is a unity to the virtues (and the vices). The deepest virtue is only one virtue, and indeed [Christ names one virtue as the foundation of all Scripture:](#)

Jesus said unto him, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

The spiritual life is one of simplicity, praying the Jesus Prayer, "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner," and the Swiss-like clockwork of the liturgy is paradoxically an entryway into this simplicity.

The most interesting way a Swiss Army Knife illumines God is not in its similarity, but precisely how its [fundamental beauty](#) differs from God's [fundamental beauty](#).

Take Your Shoes Off Your Feet:

*For the place where you stand is
holy ground*

A Meditation for Lent

**Take your shoes off of your feet:
*For the place where you stand is
holy ground***

And an angel of the Lord appeared to him in flaming fire out of the bush, and he sees that the bush burns with fire,—but the bush was not consumed. And Moses said, I will go near and see this great sight, why the bush is not consumed. And when the Lord saw that he drew nigh to see, the Lord called him out of the bush, saying, Moses, Moses, and he said, What is it? And he said, Draw not high hither: **loose thy sandals from thy feet, for the place whereon thou**

standest is holy ground. And he said, I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraam, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob; and Moses turned away his face, for he was afraid to gaze at God...

And Moses said to God, Behold, I shall go forth to the children of Israel, and shall say to them, The God of our fathers has sent me to you; and they will ask me, What is his name? What shall I say to them? And God spoke to Moses, saying, I am THE BEING, and he said, Thus shall ye say to the children of Israel, THE BEING has sent me unto you.

(Exodus 3:2-5, 13-14, Sir Lancelot Brenton's translation of the LXX)

(For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds.) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bring into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ: And having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

[I Corinthians 10:4-6, KJV](#)

The term 'passion' is used here as the Orthodox use the term, which differs from mainstream English. If you are not familiar with it, you might think of a passion as a sinful habit that has become and is becoming morally/spiritually a disease/handicap.

The Fathers bid us, in approaching holiness, to take away the dead thoughts of the passions. In their day, and in Righteous Abraham's day, and for that matter often in ours,

shoes are made of leather, the dead skin of animals, and the Fathers bid us cast away the dead thoughts of the passions as we approach God.

I would like to look at this further, but first pause to look at two distractions and say, "That is understandable, but it is fundamentally inadequate."

The first distraction: *Tinkering to straighten out our worldview*

On reading "bringing into captivity every thought", a natural reading today is "bring into captivity our worldview and every part of it," and steadily working on our worldview to make it Christian.

But the idea of thinking worldviewishly, and classifying religions (with philosophies and political ideologies) as worldviews is of recent vintage in the history of religions; it would have been as alien to Calvin and Luther as to St. Athanasios or St. John Chrysostom. A worldview appears to stand on its own, but entirely neglected is the thought that a worldview may come into existence as almost a by-product of the Way one walks.

I spoke with one person and quoted G.K. Chesterton saying, "Buddhism is not a creed. It is a doubt." I pronounced the final 't' rather silently, and he asked me if I had said, "Buddhism is not a creed. It is a Tao," meaning a Way that one walks. The conversation included his mention of a book written by a Christian missionary to Japan, [Zen Way, Jesus Way](#), and while my intended point was something else, that Buddhism is skeptical and perhaps in stronger form than most Western skepticism, the point he anticipated is also true: Buddhism is not about what you believe but the Way that you walk. And on this point we may saliently point out

that the oldest name for Christianity, the name used in the New Testament itself, is not "the Creed," but "the Way."

My godfather knew rather astutely what kinds of temptations I would face, and when I asked him a question about building an Orthodox worldview, he pointedly insisted that I had not been invited to work out an Orthodox worldview, but to walk the Orthodox Way. There may be an Orthodox worldview, but it emerges out of walking the Orthodox Way, and the suggestion that it takes seven to ten years to become Orthodox, this does not mean that it takes seven to ten years of worldview tinkering to develop the right worldview, but it takes seven to ten years for a whole person's transformation to occur. And even then, a number of Orthodox saints, described as being baptized in their own blood because they were martyred before they could manage to get baptized at all, are canonized saints who had pagan worldviews while they lived on earth, and canonized saints who did not spend their brief time confessing Christ on straightening out their worldviews.

There is something seductive about seeing things in terms of worldview; it is a hammer that soon makes everything appear to be a nail, so that "taking every thought captive" seems to mean "installing a piece of your worldview" and not, for instance, taking a lustful thought captive, and breaking it apart. But leave that for later. For now, I would note that the idea of thinking worldviewishly is of recent vintage, and mention that in Islam the term for 'heresy' is 'innovation.' Not that I am endorsing Islam; but [What the West Doesn't Get About Islam](#) is largely about the Muslim Way and only to a lesser degree about delving into the Islamic worldview.

The second distraction: *The refinement of desire*

Show me what a person desires, and I will show you his heart.

To the right is a pair of antique opera glasses; I mention it partly to show my temptations. They are a valued gift from a valued friend, but in a way they are also like [the Dr. Who sonic screwdriver a team lead got for Christmas](#): they seem like a touch of another world here: [the realms of the Urvanovestilli](#), or [The Steel Orb](#). And what seems to be a piece of an unreal world brings real pleasure, but on a deeper, spiritual level, is something of a non sequitur: I should only value the opera glasses, not as a token of worlds I have as an author imagined, but as a valued gift from a valued friend.

Reading the saints' lives has something to do with this. It may be said that the saints' lives, "biography as theology", are an important spiritual staple food for neophytes and an important spiritual staple sought out by the more advanced. My own desires have been sought out and something I wanted fulfilled: first of all by my favorite children's book, Madeleine l'Engle's [A Wind in the Door](#), which left me desiring kything, Teachers, and giftedness, and much later writing [Within the Steel Orb](#): I went to mail Madeleine l'Engle a copy but found out that she had just passed away. After a different spiritual struggle I made [The Minstrel's Song](#) with [its cultures](#), and I pined for that world. Then later I read medieval sources for the Arthurian legends, and I pined for knighthood and the Holy Grail and wrote [The Sign of the Grail](#). And the same, I believe, holds for *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Harry Potter*, romance novels of being swept off one's feet, and quite a lot of TV, literature, and movies.

We are made to desire, and there is nothing wrong with that. But our desires often point in the wrong directions,

and the saints' lives in particular help reorient and refine our desires so that we heed the Apostle's precept, Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things. We are to desire things that are real—and good.

This, however, is limited in scope; it is one point among others, and I have not read worldviewish-style attempts to tinker with one's desires in the Fathers. The verse I cited is beautiful enough, but I have not read any of the Fathers make it a leitmotif. I don't want to downplay the saints' lives, but there is more benefit to reading them than just the shaping and reshaping of our desires. But there is something of our thoughts that the Fathers make central. But let us pause for one moment before moving on.

When the ink was still drying on the medieval versions of the Arthurian legends, they told of a Never-Never Land that was long ago and far away. Such things as commerce and peasant's work *never* intrude on the scene; the pseudohistory in the "Brut" which first captivated the hearts and minds of Europe outside of Celtic circles, already placed King Arthur at six centuries in its past, in a past that never existed. There is a common thread in these desires for the unreal; we are better off desiring what is real (see Exotic Golden Ages and Restoring Harmony With Nature: Anatomy of a Passion for further discussion), and at least one saint has found happiness and said, "Whatever happens to you, desire it." Again, we are to desire what is real and desire what is good.

Not a distraction: *Taking the shoes of passionate thoughts off our feet*

It has been said, "Nothing but a metaphysic ever replaces a metaphysic." Nothing Western, at least. But a true metaphysic can be replaced by an ersatz metaphysic; unlike 'weak agnosticism', which says in essence "I do not yet know whether God, or gods, or angels exist," 'strong agnosticism' says "We can never know if God, or gods, or angels exist," and that rules out any deity capable of decisive revelation, ruling out the Christian God quickly. And that provides an ersatz metaphysic in continuity with the ersatz metaphysics implied by continental epistemology.

However, it is possible to have a metaphysic replaced by something else: Zen replaces a metaphysic with silence, and Orthodox Christianity, which has a metaphysic, also has silence, and beyond Buddhism having been influenced by Christianity and Zen resembling Orthodox hesychasm, the silence of Orthodox hesychasm is on par with the silence that replaces a metaphysic.

"You have more power than you think," an alcoholic or addict is told. Once temptation is in full swing, it's a difficult and often losing fight for the upper hand. But there is a brief, easy-to-look moment, when the temptation comes, very small.

If your house is burning down, it may take fire hoses to stop; when the fire is in a room, pouring out a bucket and running for another may stop it; easiest of all is to smush out a smouldering spark as it hits the curtains. If you blot out the spark, with it you blot out all the remaining process of damage. In a monastic setting, men were warned that if a mental image of a man's face appears, temptation to anger is close at hand, and if a woman's face appears, temptation

to lust is close at hand, and they say "[In Christ there is no male nor female](#)": neither temptation need have dominion over us.

In its beginning, the temptation is not yet a temptation. A passionate image, what the Fathers saw in the dead leather shoes Moses was commanded to remove, is not the very first part of temptation. The very first part of temptation is a simple image not mixed with passion: perhaps not a face, but an image of gold, which will soon be mixed with a temptation to covet. Then if we dally with the thought, it becomes mixed with passion, and the longer you go the harder the fight becomes. Confession is always available and it is a second baptism and a clean slate, but the Orthodox filled with hesychastic silence does not have or develop thick, strong arms from dousing buckets of water onto burning furniture, but attentiveness and quick reflexes from putting out sparks. Now this needs to be put alongside the monk who was asked, "What do you do?" and said, "We fall and get up; fall and get up; fall and get up." But hesychasm is mindful, mindful of one's thoughts, observing and mentally separating thoughts and mental images from the passions mixed in them.

Lent, the central season of the Church year:

A Lenten Psalm

Great Lent is hard, but it is the central season in the Church calendar. During Great Lent, the choir chants what may be the most politically incorrect part of Scripture:

For David, a Psalm of Jeremias

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat;
And wept when we remembered Sion.

We hung our harps on the willows in the midst of it.

For there they that had taken us captive asked of us the words of a song;

And they that had carried us away asked a hymn, saying,

Sing us one of the songs of Sion.

How should we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill.

May my tongue cleave to my throat, if I do not remember thee;

If I do not prefer Jerusalem as the chief of my joy.

Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem;

Who said, Rase it, rase it, even to its foundations.

Wretched daughter of babylon!

Blessed shall he be who shall reward thee as thou hast rewarded us.

Blessed shall he be who shall sieze and dash thine infants against the rock.

(Psalm 136/137, Sir Lancelot Brenton's translation of the LXX)

"Blessed shall *what?!@!?* This is sung in church in Lent?"

Yes: the entire Psalm speaks to our spiritual condition. We were made for Jerusalem, the city of peace, which is ultimately Heaven, but we have allowed ourselves, every one, to be taken captive to the foreign land of sin and passion. How can we sing the Lord's song when we are exiled to the land of passion? As to the last words, the Fathers say that the rock is Christ: infant Babylonians grow

into adult Babylonians, and tiny and seemingly insignificant passions, tiny sparks, grow into full-grown passions, a fire burning up our house. And it is against Christ that we must extinguish sparks. The vilest of sins is a smouldering ember thrown into the ocean of God's love, but still, the earlier we dash passions against Christ, the better. If we have allowed to a spark to set a chair on fire, douse it with Christ. And in all things remember the holy city, the city of peace which is ultimately Heaven. And strive for it.

An unwelcome, unsought blessing: "Ask better!"

Lent seems to be the sort of thing one would not want. We are to cut back on pleasures, and give more to others. And it is *supposed* to be a struggle; if we're cruising through Lent and having no worries, something is wrong, and we need to work with our priest to make it a better struggle. But monks say, "Have a good struggle."

But this much is a blessing in disguise, and is part of why devout, seasoned Orthodox often look forward to the challenge. The rules forbidding things in the Orthodox life all tell a pet, "[Don't drink out of the toilet](#)," which really means, "Ask better." Lent is about letting go of things we believe will satisfy us and accepting the things which really will satisfy us.

In my repentance implied in "[The refinement of desire](#)" above, every thing I let go of was so I could grasp something better. Perhaps my growth is more stunted than most; perhaps it is less. No matter; God has summoned me to ask better and open my hand wide to receive blessings. And I mention this not to make a big deal of my own struggle, but because these are one form of the struggles we all face,

because (I hope) they could serve as Everyman's struggles, and I could concretely name something we all must face to ask better.

Ask better. And have a good struggle.

The Transcendent God Who Approaches Us Through Our Neighbor

The temperature of Heaven can be rather accurately computed from available data. Our authority is the Bible: Isaiah 30:26 reads, *Moreover the light of the Moon shall be as the light of the Sun and the light of the Sun shall be sevenfold, as the light of seven days.* Thus Heaven receives from the Moon as much radiation as we do from the Sun and in addition seven times seven (forty-nine) times as much as the Earth does from the Sun, or fifty times in all. The light we receive from the Moon is a ten-thousandth of the light we receive from the sun, so we can ignore that. With these data we can compute the temperature of Heaven. The radiation falling on Heaven will heat it to the point where the heat lost by radiation is just equal to the heat lost by radiation. Using the Stefan-Boltzmann fourth power law for radiation and where H is the temperature of Heaven, E that of the Earth - 300 K - we have

$$(H/E)_4 = 50.$$

This gives H as 798 K or 525°C.

The exact temperature of Hell cannot be computed but it must be less than 444.6°C, the temperature at which brimstone or sulphur changes from a liquid to a gas. Revelations 21:8: *But the fearful, and unbelieving . . . shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone.* A lake of molten brimstone means that its temperature must be below the boiling point, which is 444.6°C.

We have, then, temperature of Heaven, 525°C. Temperature of Hell, less than 445°C. Therefore, Heaven is hotter than Hell.

Applied Optics, 11, A14 (1972)

One brief remark before continuing: one man I knew was in an elevator on a sweltering hot day, when a profusely sweating jogger stepped into the elevator and said, "It's hotter 'n Hell out there!" and he replied, slowly, "No, it isn't." There is something amiss with the humorous quote above, and Mark Twain, the great humorist, wrote, "*The secret source of humor itself is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in Heaven.*" There is a sense in Orthodoxy that humor does not belong in the holiest places, and devout Orthodox I know have a deep joy but laugh little. The connotations of "humorless" do not describe them; they are not sour, nor joyless, nor rigid, nor quick to take offense, but they are luminous with the Light of a Heaven that needs no humor.

But the physicist quoted above underscores something: words are inadequate to capture Heaven. There are

situations in life where words fail us: people say, "Words cannot express how grateful I am." And if words fail us for expressing gratitude, for instance, or romantic love, they fail all the more in describing Heaven and God. "Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, heart has not conceived, what God has prepared for them that love him:" words cannot express Heaven, nor God.

In classical theology this is spoken of as God's *transcendence*: God is infinitely far beyond any created thing. He is reflected in a million ways in our created world, but the hidden transcendent God is beyond all of them. In a book of profound influence but only a few pages long, *The Mystical Theology*, St. Dionysius writes of ascending towards God:

The fact is that the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming; so that now as we plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing...

So this is what we say. The Cause of all is above all and is not inexistent, lifeless, speechless, mindless. He is not a material body, and hence has neither shape nor form, quality, quantity, or weight. He is not in any place and can neither be seen nor be touched. He is neither perceived nor is he perceptible. He suffers neither disorder nor disturbance and is overwhelmed by no earthly passion. He is not powerless and subject to the disturbances caused by sense perception. He endures no deprivation of light. He passes through no change, decay, division, loss, no ebb and flow, nothing of which the senses may be aware. None of all this can either be identified with it nor attributed to it.

Again, as we climb higher we say this. He is not soul or mind, nor does he possess imagination, conviction, speech, or understanding. Nor is he speech *per se*, understanding *per se*. He cannot be spoken of and he cannot be grasped by understanding. He is not number or order, greatness or smallness, equality or inequality, similarity or dissimilarity. He is not immovable, moving, or at rest. He has no power, he is not power, nor is he light. He does not live nor is he life. He is not a substance, nor is he eternity or time. He cannot be grasped by the understanding since he is neither knowledge nor truth. He is not kingship. He is not wisdom. He is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness. Nor is he a spirit, in the sense in which we understand that term. He is not sonship or fatherhood and he is nothing known to us or to any other being. He falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being. Existing beings do not know him as he actually is and he does not know them as they are. There is no speaking of him, nor name nor knowledge of him. Darkness and light, error and truth—he is none of these. He is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to him, but never *of* him, for he is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of his preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; he is also beyond every denial.

Over a millenium before a Bultmann would go on a program of saying that the images we have in Scripture are inadequate, the Orthodox Church would do one better. Her saints would tell of the hidden transcendent God who transcends everything we might say of him. And better than

this can be said. *God transcends his own transcendence, and transcends transcendence itself.* And here we must leave Bultmann completely behind as not having gone far enough.

God transcends his own transcendence, and the transcendent God so far transcends his own transcendence that not only is he infinitesimally close to the Creation, immanent to all Creation, but he *entered* his Creation: God became man. And the reason God became man is that man might become divine. And there is never a sharp separation between Christ coming to save mankind and Christ coming to save the whole Creation: the transcendent God so far transcends his own incomparable transcendence that he is at work to deify men, and ultimately the whole Creation. In Christ there is no male nor female, paradise nor inhabited world, heaven nor earth, spiritual nor material, uncreated nor created, but Christ is all, and in all, and transcends all, and in him all these differences are to be transcended. The transcendent Christ God transcends his Creation and transcends his own transcendence, and he returns to his Father in victory, bearing deified men and Creation as trophies who share in his transcendent victory. There is no distinction between male and female, paradise and the inhabited world, heaven and earth, spiritual and material, uncreated God and created creation, for the same transcendent Lord is Lord of all and bestows riches upon all who call him, and makes all one in Christ Jesus.

And this Lord who infinitely transcends his creation shouts through it. He shouts through icons, through every human love, through music, through storm and star. He is a God who so far transcends his Creation that he can enter into it, and a failure to love our neighbor is a failure to love God. Consider the parable of the sheep and the goats:

When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his

glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left.

Then the King will say to those at his right hand, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me."

Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?"

And the King will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."

Then he will say to those at his left hand, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me."

Then they also will answer, "Lord, when did we

see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?"

Then he will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me."

And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

This transcendent God transcends his own Creation and transcends his own transcendence that his image is imprinted in every man, woman, and child, and we cannot fail to love our neighbor without failing to love Christ God; we cannot mistreat our neighbor without mistreating Christ God. Christ so far transcends his own transcendence that there is not the faintest gap between our treatment of our least neighbors and our treatment of Christ God himself. The Pope is not Christ's vicar on earth; our neighbor is Christ's vicar on earth, and how we treat our neighbor is vicariously how we treat the Christ we will answer to on Judgment Day.

And who is our neighbor? Let's have a slightly updated answer with disturbing clarity:

A certain religious scholar stood up and tested Jesus, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal Life?"

He said to him, "What is written in the heart of the Bible? How do you read it?"

He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your inward being, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself."

He said to him, "You have answered correctly. Do this, and you will live."

But he, desiring to justify himself, asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?"

Jesus answered, "A certain man, an American, went into the worst part of town at night and was held up by thugs who took not only took his valuables but beat him and left him for dead, throwing him deep into a dark alley.

"By chance a police officer was walking down that way. When he saw the man, he gave the alley a wide berth and ran along.

"In the same way a boy scout passed through the place and gave the alley a wide berth.

"But when it got to the wee hours of the morning, he heard footsteps and a terrorist came along, and the man called out 'Help me!' from the dark alley in the worst part of town. And the terrorist was viscerally moved with compassion, came to him, and bandaged his wounds, using some of his clothing, and carried him to an emergency room.

"When the terrorist left, he took all of the money that he had with him, and gave it to the hospital, and said, 'Take care of him. Whatever you spend beyond what I have given you, I will repay.'

"Now which of these three do you think seemed to be a neighbor to him who fell among the robbers?"

He said, "He who showed mercy on him." Then Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise."

Do you believe God is transcendent? Go and do likewise to the transcendent Christ who approaches you in your neighbor.

Treasure

Treasure is not measured in dollars

I would like to begin by telling a story. I was in a medical waiting room for a medical test, when a mother came in, pulling along a little girl by the hand, and taking care of the paperwork. The child had, by the looks of it, slammed her thumb in a door or something similar: there was a dark purple bulge under her thumbnail. I remembered when that had happened to me, and I was **not** a happy camper. No wonder the little girl was bawling her eyes out!

She was sitting in a chair, and I thought things might be better if she were engaged in a conversation. So, gently and softly, I told her a joke: "What kind of musical instrument does a dog play?" and answered, "A trombone." She didn't get it. So I tried to talk about several other things, trying and failing to engage her in conversation. After a few minutes, I had still managed an absolute zero percent success rate at making age-appropriate conversation that would allow her to contribute her half of the conversation. But I realized something: she was looking at me, and she was not crying. I had obtained her rapt attention, and for the moment she had completely stopped crying.

I was called and politely took my leave; a few minutes later, after my blood draw, I came out and the mother was giving

TLC and comforting her daughter. The mother said, "You have a very gentle way about you." I thanked her, shook the daughter's hand, and told her, "I have to leave now, but I'm glad I met you." The mother repeated once or twice, "You have a very gentle way about you." And she caressed her little one.

This is a tale of treasure, and it arose in my heart, perhaps, because none of it is measured with dollars. My blood test cost money, of course, and the treatment of the child's thumb presumably also cost money, of course, but the treasure is not measured in dollars. If the treasure were of gold, or some other material item, one could equate treasure with a high dollar value, but for the mother to pay me money, or for me to ask for it, would have been a crass way of defacing a treasure. There was joy and a lesson in it for me, and pain relief and a pleasant meeting for the child, but this, this *treasure*, falls under the heading of "The best things in life are free."

By contrat, I would tell a joke:

I was trying to help a friend's son look into colleges, and yesterday he handed me the phone, really excited, and said, "You have got to speak with these guys." I fumbled the phone, picked it up, and heard, "—online. We offer perhaps the best-rounded of degrees, and from day one our students are equipped with a top-of-the-line Dell running up-to-the-minute Vista. We address back-end issues, giving students a grounding in Visual Basic .NET, striking the right balance between 'reach' and 'rich,' and a thorough groundings in Flash-based design and web design optimized for the latest version of Internet Explorer. Throw in an MCSE, and marketing-based communication instruction that harnesses the full power of PowerPoint and covers the most

effective ways to make use of animated pop-ups, opt-in subscriber lists, and—"

I interrupted. "Excuse me, but what is your institution *called*?"

"The Aristocrats."

For those of you who have been spared the joke, there is a classic off-color joke where a group of performers approach a theatre owner or the like, are asked what they do and describe an X-rated show that is grosser than gross (bestiality, necrophilia, ...), and when asked what they are called, say, "The Aristocrats."

The fork off that joke above is that all of these mostly technological items, however expensive, are false treasure at best. The original "The Aristocrats" is plain in advertising anti-treasure; the latter take, in a Unix chauvinist's way, has things that appear to be treasure but are really false treasure, anti-treasure that calls for the grosser-than-gross punch line. [And perhaps more than one of those jokes is false treasure, but we won't go into that.](#)

My reason for mentioning treasure that is free, like the best things in life, and expensive anti-treasure, is to say that while many treasures may be worth money, and bigger treasures can be worth more money, real treasure is beyond money. [The best things in life are free](#), as the saying goes.

Living for treasure

I live to create treasure. Actually I live to contemplate God, and worship his glory, but there are a million concrete ways one can contemplate God, and one of them is creating treasure. [My website at CJSHayward.com](#) is created to be a treasure, or a treasurehouse of treasures, and while there

are pieces you could look at and say, "You botched this and that," my intent is still to create a treasure. There are other areas where I try to create treasure (a picturebook of loved ones for a hospitalized child), but the greatest success I receive is to finish something and find it has been a treasure to the person who has received it.

In [Doxology](#), God the Father is called,

The Treasure for whom all treasures are named,

And if ever there is treasure, he is God. Mankind and angels are treasures; there is a discussion in the Gospel where Christ is asked if it is lawful to pay a tax or not, asks to see the coin used to pay the tax, and asked whose image and superscription it was. "Give what is Caesar's to Caesar, and what is God's to God;" thus Jesus Christ appealed to a principle that whoever coins money has the authority to tax that money. Augustine picks up on this: "[Caesar seeketh his image; render it; God seeketh his image; render it. Let not Caesar lose from you his coin: let not God lose in you His coin.](#)" He explores it, and there is the suggestion at least that we are God's coins: first and foremost by being struck with his image, but it cannot be too far from mind that coins could be struck on precious metal, that a coin is treasure. Augustine attends to the minor point, that the mere earthly coin with Caesar's image is due to Caesar, but all the much more the coin imprinted in the image of God and nothing less, is due to God: a parish of faithful followers is much more a treasury than a room with chests of silver coins.

The Lord God Almighty and the Uncreated Light reigns over all; the Uncreated Light illumines the cherubim, seraphim, thrones, dominions, powers, authorities, principalities, archangels, and angels: the glory and treasure of the Lord thunder through rank on rank of angel host. The Mother of God bore God in her womb and exchanged with her Son: she gave him his humanity, and he gave to her from his

divinity, leaving her as a treasure eclipsing all the angels. The treasure unfurls and unfolds on earth: the sacramental priesthood and the spiritual priesthood, songs, liturgy, angels, and ten thousand other treasures. And treasure is close to the heart of the treasure of the Church: a Church saying says, "If you have two small coins, you use one to buy bread for the altar, and the other to buy flowers for the icons."

Hard treasure

There are some hard lessons in [The Best Things In Life Are Free](#), and hard lessons in [Maximum Christ, Maximum Ambition, Maximum Repentance](#). But both of these give up false treasure for true treasure, true treasure for greater treasure. Christ commanded something great: "[Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.](#)" Some of us are to hold earthly treasure with detachment; others are to get rid of it altogether, but in any case we are called to reach far beyond earthly treasure for treasures in Heaven, such as good works, virtues, and graces. The call is a Narnian [Further up and further in!](#)

We live in a time where treasures seem to be evaporating, or at least money. Once a rising standard of living was taken for granted; now employment is not taken for granted. We are urged to sell gold for cash. But treasure is still here. [The best things in life are free](#), even now, [even if we are in an arena, a cosmic coliseum](#). False treasures abound; for treacherous technology, see [the Technomicon](#). And there is a great deal in technologies that can be treacherous, [with a right grievous backswing](#). But that is not all.

The authors John Calvin and Thomas Hobbes were authors with a very pessimistic view of mankind. But in the comic strip named after them, *Calvin and Hobbes*, we meet a claim well worth heeding:

There's treasure everywhere!

What Makes Me Uneasy About Fr. Seraphim (Rose) and His Followers

Uncomfortable and uneasy—the root cause?

Two out of many quotes from a discussion where I got jackhammered for questioning whether Fr. Seraphim is a full-fledged saint:

"Quite contrary, the only people who oppose [Fr. Seraphim's] teachings, are those who oppose some or all of the universal teachings of the Church, held by Saints throughout the ages. Whether a modern theologian with a 'PhD,' a 'scholar', a schismatic clergymen, a deceived layperson, or Ecumenist or rationalist - these are the only types of people you will find having a problem with Blessed Seraphim and his teachings."

"If he's not a saint, who is?"

There are things that make me uneasy about many of Fr.

Seraphim (Rose)'s followers. I say *many* and not *all* because I have friends, and know a lovely parish, that is Orthodox today through Fr. Seraphim. One friend, who was going through seminary, talked about how annoyed he was, and appropriately enough, that Fr. Seraphim was always referred to as "that guy who taught the tollhouses."

(*Tollhouses* are the subject of a controversial teaching about demonic gateways one must pass to enter Heaven.) Some have suggested that he may not become a canonized saint because of his teachings there, but that is not the end of the world and apparently tollhouses were a fairly common feature of nineteenth century Russian piety. I personally do not believe in tollhouses, although it would not surprise me that much if I die and find myself suddenly and clearly convinced of their existence: I am mentioning my beliefs, as a member of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia, and it is not my point to convince others that they must not believe in tollhouses.

It is with sympathy that I remember my friend talk about how his fellow seminarians took a jackhammer to him for his admiration of "that guy who taught the tollhouses." He has a good heart. Furthermore, his parish, which came into Holy Orthodoxy because of Fr. Seraphim, is much more than alive. When I visited there, God visited me more powerfully than any parish I have only visited, and I would be delighted to see their leadership any time. Practically nothing in that parish's indebtedness to Fr. Seraphim bothers me. Nor would I raise objections to the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia's newsletter affectionately calling Fr. Seraphim "our editor." Nor am I bothered that a title of his has been floating around the nave at my present parish.

But with all that said, there is something that disturbs me about most devotees of Fr. Seraphim, or at very least most of his vocal devotees. The best way I can put it has to do with *subjectivism*, which says in essence, "I will accept what

I will accept, and I will reject what I will reject, and I will project what I will project." There is something that demands that Fr. Seraphim be canonized as a saint regardless of whether he really should be, almost like "My country, right or wrong!" This isn't the only thing that smells disturbing, but it is one. And these followers who insist that Fr. Seraphim be canonized as a saint seem to quickly gloss over how he broke away from canonical status in the Orthodox Church to dodge Church discipline. Now I do not wish to exceed my authority and speak *ex cathedra* to decisively say which sins should be a bar from sainthood; it is God's job to make saints out of sinners, and any sin that Fr. Seraphim has committed, there are canonized saints who did something ten times worse. However, this is an example of something that needs to be brought to light if we are to know if Fr. Seraphim should be considered a saint, and in every conversation I've seen, the (vocal) devotees of Fr. Seraphim push to sweep such things under the rug and get on with his canonization.

To pull something from putting subjectivism in a word: "I will accept what I will accept, and I will reject what I will reject, and I will project what I will project" usurps what God, O ΩN, supremely declares: "**I AM WHO I AM.**" Subjectivism overreaches and falls short in the same gesture; if you grasp it by the heart, it is the passion of pride, but if you grasp it by the head, it is called subjectivism, but either way it has the same stench. And it concerns me gravely that whenever I meet these other kinds of followers, Fr. Seraphim's most vocal advocates, it smells the same, and it ain't no rose.

Protestant Fundamentalist Orthodoxy

A second concern is that, in many of Fr. Seraphim's

followers, there is something Protestant to be found in the Church. Two concerns to be mentioned are "Creation Science"-style creationism, and the fundamentally Western project of worldview construction.

On the issue of "Creation Science"-style creationism, I would like to make a couple of comments. First, the Fathers usually believed that the days in Genesis 1 were literal days and not something more elastic. I believe I've read at least one exception, but St. Basil, for instance, insists both that one day was one day, and that we should believe that matter is composed of earth, air, fire, water, and ether. The choice of a young earth and not any other point of the Fathers is not the fruit of the Fathers at all; it is something Protestant brought into the Orthodox Church, and at every point I've seen it, Orthodox who defend a young earth also use Protestant Creation Science, which is entirely without precedent in the Fathers. One priest said, "It was easier to get the children of Israel out of Egypt than it is to get Egypt out of the children of Israel." There have been many Orthodox who believe entirely legitimately in a young earth, but every single time I have met young earth arguments from a follower of Fr. Seraphim, they have drawn on recycled Protestant arguments and fundamentalist Protestant Creation Science. And they have left me wishing that now that God has taken them out of Egypt they would let God take Protestant Egypt out of them.

I observed something quite similar to this in a discussion where I asked a partisan of Fr. Seraphim for an example of his good teaching. The answer I was given was a call for Orthodox to work on constructing a worldview, and this was presented to me as the work of a saint at the height of his powers. But there's a problem.

The project of worldview construction, and making standalone adjustments to the ideas in one's worldview, is of Western origin. There is no precedent for it in the

Fathers, nor in medieval Western scholastic theologians like Thomas Aquinas, nor for that matter in the Reformers. The widespread idea that Christians should "think worldviewishly", and widespread understanding of Christianity as a worldview, is of more recent vintage than the Roman proclamations about the Immaculate Conception and the Infallibility of the Pope, and the Protestant cottage industry of worldview construction is less Orthodox than creating a systematic theology. *If* there is an Orthodox worldview, it does not come from tinkering with ideas in your head to construct a worldview; it arises from walking the Orthodox Way for a lifetime. Protestants who come into Orthodoxy initially want to learn a lot, but after time spend less time with books because Orthodoxy has taken deeper root in their hearts and reading about the truth begins to give way to living it out. Devotional reading might never stop being a spiritual discipline, but it is no longer placed in the driver's seat, nor should it be.

This tree: What to make of its fruit?

This is strong language, but in the [Sermon on the Mount](#), Christ says:

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will know them by their fruits.

Not every one who says to me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then will I declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers."

Fr. Seraphim has borne fruit in his lifetime and after his death. In his lifetime, there was the one fruit I mentioned, a close tie to someone who broke communion with the Orthodox Church shortly after his death. After his death, he has brought Protestants into the Orthodox Church. But in the living form of his disciples, those who have been taken out of Egypt seem not to have Egypt taken out of them; they have asked me to pay homage to Protestant calves they've brought with them.

Let me try to both introduce something new, and tie threads together here. Subjectivism can at its heart be described as breaking communion with reality. This is like breaking communion with the Orthodox Church, but in a way it is more deeply warped. It is breaking communion not only with God, but with the very cars, rocks and trees. I know this passion and it is the passion that has let me live in first world luxury and wish I lived in a castle. It tries to escape the gift God has given. And that passion in another form can say, "If God offers me Heaven, and Heaven requires me to open up and stop grasping Fr. Seraphim right or wrong, I will escape to a Hell that makes no such demand for me to open up to God or His reality." And it is a red flag of this passion that breaks communion with reality, that the people most devoted to Fr. Seraphim hold on to pieces of fundamentalism with a tightly closed fist. And these Protestant insistences are a red flag, like a plume of smoke: if one sees a plume of smoke coming from a house, a

neighbor's uncomfortable concern is not that a plume of smoke is intolerable, but that where there's smoke, there's fire and something destructive may be going on in that house. And when I see subjectivism sweep things under the rug to insist on Fr. Seraphim's canonization, and fail to open a fist closed on Protestant approaches to Holy Orthodoxy, I am concerned not only that Fr. Seraphim's colleague may have broken communion with the Orthodox Church to avoid Church discipline, but that Fr. Seraphim's devotees keep on breaking communion with reality when there is no question of discipline. The plume of smoke is not intolerable in itself, but it may betray fire.

I may be making myself unpopular here, but I'm bothered by Fr. Seraphim's fruit. I know that there have been debates down the centuries between pious followers of different saints—but I have never seen this kind of phenomenon with another well-known figure in today's Orthodoxy.

So far as I have tasted it, Fr. Seraphim's fruit tastes bad.