

What is Truth? (Archpriest Gregory Hallam)

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Icon of Jesus

Pontius Pilate's cry has been echoed down the ages and it seems that it has a particular resonance today when, intellectually speaking; only science seems to offer the kind of objective truth once claimed by theology itself. In some ways this shift has been accelerated by our shrinking world and the challenge of meeting those of other faiths. Of course, Christians knew of the existence of other religions in times past, but they were rarely encountered on home soil and could be just as easily be dismissed by the collective description "heathen" or perhaps "pagan." Today when your next door neighbour is likely to be a Muslim – at least in Europe- it is less easy for many to understand or even accept that in matters of faith one

might be right and the other wrong. To the outsider, sympathetic or otherwise, faith has lost its anchorage in truth.

This scepticism presents problems for faiths that interpret history and historical events as the stage for God's action. There is a scientific component to religious truth in these historical religions because there is a reliance on historical evidence as well as religious experience. In Orthodox Christianity there can be no opposition between truths that span revelation and human truth telling in history. Evidence and faith arbitrate in both realms as one. Taken as a whole, there can only be one consistent realm of Truth worthy of the name and this is to be found in the Logos. In Christ, the Word made flesh, the Way, the Truth and the Life is made known, (John 14:6). It is not of course necessary for everyone to accept this centring on Christ as the All-Inclusive-Truth for it actually to be the case. The final revelation of this Truth is not until the End when God will be all and in all, (1 Corinthians 15:28).

With these base lines for Truth, there is no room for compartmentalisation. Distinctions exist of course between the differing genres of truth; scientific, religious, poetic, artistic, mythic and literary, but no final conflicting separations or oppositions. The foundation for such an approach to truth may be found in the Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church. St. John the Theologian writes this concerning the Incarnation of Christ:-

"The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world." [John 1:9]

One of the very earliest martyrs of the Church, Justin, elaborated very profoundly on this theme:-

"Whatever things were rightly said among all men, are the property of us Christians."

[2nd Apology chapter 13]

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

«Even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and the other elements of this world, about the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions, about the predictable eclipses of the sun and moon, the cycles of the years and the seasons, about the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones,

and so forth, and this knowledge he holds as being certain from reason and experience.

Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn.
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[St. Augustine from his Commentary on Genesis]

St. Basil the Great in turn wrote to his students encouraging them to study secular literature if it was conducive to virtue and truth. He compared the discernment process to a bee seeking out good nectar wherever it might be found and rivers that broaden and deepen as they empty into the sea.

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

- *For the Young on How They Might Derive Profit from Hellenic Literature*
(St. Basil the Great 364)

So, Truth is one and all truths are to be found personally in Christ who gathers unto Himself all that is true, beautiful and good.

However, there remains the apparent problem of oppositional truth claims. In recent times in the west some have defined truth in the very narrow manner of logical positivism, a philosophy that reduces all truth to logically deducible propositions from observable evidence. This approach has more or less broken down under its own weight for it has become patently clear that its associated reductionism fails to account for different genres of truth which are not susceptible of the scientific method. Sadly, the intellectual climate in philosophy in the west after the war has remained hostile to metaphysical and theological conceptions of truth and the literary emphasis of its main protagonists has emphasised story or contextual narratives, which in turn have tended to dissipate in postmodern relativism. The diversity of human experience, culture and religious sensibilities has made it increasingly difficult for post modernism to imagine any possible resolution of competing truth claims, particularly between the domains of the dominant global religions. Since in Orthodoxy all truth claims are grounded in the

Tradition of The Church, perhaps community and relatedness can help us out of the impasse of this essentially individualistic and highly subjectivised approach.

Faith, in Martin Buber's conception presupposes an "I" in relation to a "Thou" (God). Metropolitan John Zizoulas of Pergamon describes something similar in his thinking about identity as communion or relatedness. Religious experience is intensely personal and yet it is located in a community of faith – not in a lab, a library or even the mind of a reflective subject. How, therefore, might competing truth claims be resolved when communities themselves sustain incompatible accounts? We may know what we like in the art gallery but that cannot help us when defending a notion of right believing, orthodoxy, against heresy. Surely norms of belief are entirely relative to the communities that sustain them? Postmodernism indeed supposes that there can be no metanarrative of universal truth binding us all. Must we agree – but in that case how could we hang on to a notion of Orthodoxy (upper or lower case) and universal truth?

Before handing in the towel to post modernism, let us recall what was said about Christ earlier; that He is All-Truth at its Omega point. This rescues us from the kind of exclusivism that rules out God's action outside the Church, yet realistically includes all that is good within the Incarnation, recapitulating (as St. Irenaeus of Lyons taught) the fullness of our human nature and history. But, we are not yet at this Omega point, so how can we present Christ as the Truth, NOW, amongst all this competing subjectivity? Wouldn't that require some criterion of discernment that separated the wheat from the chaff, true prophecy as it were from magic crystals? I contend that it would indeed.

There are in effect two such main criteria (at least). Amongst the historical faiths some discernment depends on what actually happened: so if the Ever Virgin Mary, the Theotokos, only imagined Gabriel's message, Jesus had a natural conception and the gospel is false. If the tomb wasn't actually empty then the resurrection didn't happen and the gospel again falls and Christianity with it. What happened does actually matter. History is no mere metaphor.

The other criterion concerns holiness. Although a subjective judgement to some extent, true goodness with its handmade beauty is not an illusion in the affairs of humankind. Perhaps the Orthodox above all need to insist that there is verifiable religious truth and that the credibility of this stance is based on recognisable transformations in both persons and communities. "By their fruits you shall know them" as our Lord taught (Matthew 7:16). This test, which we might call Orthopraxy, needs to have traceable contexts in Orthodox believing and worship. This applies also to human experience more generally, where the fullness of Truth

“once revealed to the saints” (Colossians 1:26) is to be found, the Logos acting in the Cosmos. In this manner the problematic question: “What is Truth?” might more readily be answered, with perhaps some surprising results.

By Archpriest Gregory Hallam

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