

November 17, 2013

First Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Revelation and Time

A major underlying assumption of Christian Theology is the historical nature of Revelation and Redemption. Indeed, this assumption has the quality of a principle.

It is instructive to reflect on the apparent implausibility—not to say, the scandal—of this principle; it represents an affront to both the Perennial Philosophy and widespread religious assumptions of mankind.

History is an area of humane studies very resistant to the laws of science and mathematics—the laws, that is to say, which govern all human beings, regardless of their when and where in this world. To assert, then—as Christians do—that Revelation and Redemption enter human experience through contingent historical facts and events must, on the face of it, inhibit most men's access to Revelation and Redemption. This is the reason the Christian claims were rejected by, for instance, the thinkers of the Enlightenment, who believed that man's relationship to God (if God exists, which most of them accepted) must be kept quite separate from history.

Let me try to express the apparent implausibility of the Christian claim another way: Let us admit, as an experiment, that classical Greek philosophy was correct in regarding the pursuit of virtue as the proper path to a well-lived life, or (in recognizable Latin) man's *bene esse*. It is not useful, for the moment, to describe the differences among Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle on how to attain this "well being"; the important thing is that all of them believed in everybody's more-or-less equal entitlement to the human *bene esse*. Even though we identify this line of thought as "Greek," those three Greeks assumed that man's "well being" was not necessarily tied to being Greek; it was essentially human.

Now, contrast this classical assumption with the last line of a poem Holy Church prays every Saturday. She declares of God, "He announces His word to Jacob, His claims and judgments to Israel. He did not treat every nation this way; nor did He disclose His judgments to them" (Psalm

147:9; in Hebrew 147:20). This is a pretty firm rejection, it seems to me, of that classical Greek hypothesis.

That is to say, God's claims and judgments—the stuff of Revelation and Redemption—are surely the substance of man's true *bene esse*. Yet, God limited their disclosure to a specific stream of history: the Jews. In the fullness of time, God did disclose His historical claims and judgments to the Greeks, as well, but the Greeks were obliged to receive this material as a gift from a handful of Jews.

This is what I have called the apparent implausibility—not to say, scandal—of the Christian assumption about history. Why, asks the Perennial Philosophy, should everybody have to depend on claims and judgments God revealed through Jewish history? In short, "Are not the Abana, and the Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?"

Let me respond by pointing out that the Perennial Philosophy, in making this objection, is reacting with a simple and straightforward bias. It assumes, on the basis of nothing but a preference, that man discovers his capacity for transcendence—and, consequently, his capacity to hear from God—only through an abstraction from all that is not God. It chooses timelessness. It is a bias against time and what it thinks to be the ravages time inflicts on human beings.

This is also, I believe, a scholastic bias; it attempts to get past "accidents" (the contingent qualities of being) in order to arrive at quasi-eternal "being," which remains constant, whatever the contingencies in which it is found.

In fact, however, a lively openness to the contingencies of history pertains to human nature itself. Man's being (*einai*), as St. Gregory of Nyssa said, cannot be adequately expressed except in terms of a historical process, a "becoming" (*genesthai*). This is clear in certain features of consciousness that tie it—even in respect to transcendent experience—closely to history. A man's consciousness cannot be separated from certain contingent "facts," such as the socially conveyed impulse to measure time, the stimulant structure of grammar in one's inherited language, and the free assumption of responsibility for one's historical choices. These things tie human consciousness, at its deepest level, to history.

I contend, moreover, that these qualities of consciousness, because they are unique to man, render it more likely, not less, that God, if He decided to speak and act, would do so through the contingencies of history. Otherwise, why make man a hearer and a watcher?

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