

August 30, 2015
Fantinus of Calabria

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

It is instructive to reflect on the apparent implausibility---indeed, the scandal---of the biblical claim to a favored position for a particular people within history. How is it possible that *any* people could be God's *chosen* people? The claim represents an affront to both the Perennial Philosophy and the widespread religious assumptions of mankind. (I have, on occasion, spoken with Jews—the Chosen People themselves!—who were resistant to the idea.)

To deny that claim, however, on grounds *a priori*, is to deny the historical quality of the Christian faith—a thing some Christians seem prepared to do. But to deny that historical quality—or in any way to diminish it—is to forsake the very Gospel.

Although I have always believed that philosophy may be the servant of Sacred Theology, this will hardly be possible unless philosophy takes its directions from Theology, as any servant should, not vice-versa. An abiding problem of what I may call “the Scholastic Impulse” shows itself when the roles are reversed—those instances when Theology is not given a voice until philosophy has already set the agenda. I believe this reversal goes a long way to account for the weakening of a historical sense in Scholastic Theology (not, in my opinion, a completely Western problem).

Likewise, history is an area of humane studies very resistant to the laws of science and mathematics—the laws, that is to say, that govern all human beings in certain essential respects, regardless of their *when* and *where* in this world.

To assert, as Christians do, that Revelation and Redemption enter human experience through contingent historical facts and events may seem to 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 thought 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*.

Now, contrast this classical assumption with the last line of a poem the Church prays every Saturday, when 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). This is a pretty firm rejection, it seems to me, of that classical Greek hypothesis about *everybody's* equal access to things unseen.

Christians declare that God's claims and judgments—the stuff of Revelation and Redemption—are the substance of man's true *bene esse*. Yet, God limited their disclosure to a specific stream of history: the Jews (including, of course, Jesus and the Apostles). 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 Revelation as a gift from an improbable handful of Jews, who came wandering over from the Levant.

This is what I call the apparent implausibility—scandal, even—of the Christian assumption about history. Why, asks the Perennial Philosophy, should *everybody* have to depend on claims and judgments God revealed only through *Jewish* history? Surely we are permitted to ask, "Are not the Abana, and the Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel?"

A proper response to this question should make the point that the Perennial Philosophy, in making this objection, is reacting from 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 receive a message from God—only through an abstraction from everything that is not God, history in particular, and a particular history especially. Although its adherents seem almost never to admit the fact, the Perennial Philosophy, in its flight from history, deliberately *chooses* timelessness, thereby manifesting what is only an epistemological bias, a *closed* mind and nothing more.