

Creed and Coexistence:

Living What We Believe in the Marketplace of Ideas

by

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If America dips toward decline, if respect for human dignity runs cold, if public discourse leans towards ever further coarsening, if hospitality sprawls withering under turf-defending individualism, if contemporary Christianity bleeds credibility, if moral anemia increasingly infects our laws and institutions, if sexual confusion—nay, brash perversity—furnishes the new norm, can such cultural deterioration be seen as a gift?

In a certain slant of light, maybe. And the key to such optimism may be to understand that as modernity slides toward depravity, we also slip closer toward the conditions in which the early Church thrived. Cultural deterioration may not be an inherently good development, and Christian citizens do not encourage or ignore it in the naïve hope that a renewal of early Church conditions will necessarily produce a corresponding renewal of early Church piety. We do not sin so that grace may abound (cf. Rom. 6:1). But should dark times darken hope, the quiet-but-consistently bold, culture-influencing Faith of our early brothers and sisters may provide encouragement.

The "Foolishness" of the Fullness of Time

How do we make sense of the Providence of God - "emptying Himself and taking on the form of servant" (Phil. 2:7) at a time in history most dangerous to do so? Fascinating that the Incarnation should unfold at a time in which the success of any birth was far from certain. The Christ Child is born into a society where Roman Law granted to the *paterfamilias* of any family a full eight days to decide whether that child should even live. Joseph's priorities were different, as we know, and we are all beneficiaries.

How to make sense of the Providence of God - "becoming flesh, dwelling among us, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14) at a time when any sermon stating that only one true God exists could be silenced by the edge of a sword? Curious that the scandal of monotheism should mature at a moment in history when, because of Rome's ever-growing reach, polytheism was essential to maintaining social order.

How to make sense of the Providence of God—conceived in the flesh by a virgin within a culture of such sexual confusion that what was the more deviant was the more celebrated? Strange that the glory of chastity—on radiant display in Christ, His mother, and His Forerunner—should be featured at a time in history when prostitution, orgies, homosexuality, abortion, contraception, pedophilia, male infidelity, and so on, were commonplace.

Yet, all those deviancies—the infanticide, the polytheism, the sexuality—lay tangled around what St Paul calls the "fullness of time" (Gal. 4:4) of the Incarnation. Strange is the Providence of God.

But what was the alternative? If the Christ had been born into a world in which a pro-life king would never have slaughtered 14,000 innocents trying to get to Him, or in which a pro-monotheistic culture would never have martyred Christians for their exclusivist claims, or in which a pro-chastity society would never have resisted the sanity of either the monastic movement or chaste marriage, what would have happened to Christianity's *core of transcendence*? If Christ had known not a cross but comfort, would the Church have emerged as the radical, counter-cultural, heaven-pointing, Spirit-filled, other-worldly, theanthropic organism she is?

"You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world" (John 8:23). If He had had the favor of the world, would these words of our Lord, referring to Himself but echoing through His Church, have meant anything to us?

It was precisely this perverted ecosystem into which the seed of the early Church was planted which clarified her identity and quickened her purpose. Converts were freely choosing the Church out of exhaustion with their former excesses, or frustration with their former devaluation, or inspiration of what their lives could become, even though conversion meant widespread ridicule and real threat of danger. They just knew this Gospel was different, and not merely "the empire at prayer."

At its emergence in the Mediterranean world of the first century, the Christian creed was a belief that the *immanent*—impressive, yes, but so class-driven, so power-mad and pleasure-moist—could somehow give way to the *transcendent*—so divine and other, yet so interior and available! But what becomes of anyone's search for the transcendent if the immanent is so likable? Who wants to come out of a warm bath or a warm bed?

In *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark famously estimates a growth rate of 40% per decade for Christianity in its first three hundred years, precisely at a time when Christians had no recourse to pass a law in our favor or elect a politician to our cause. Converts were wooed not by force but by persuasion.

As America ails, Christians do not greet this decline with a shrug or some stupefied skyward gazing for the return of Jesus. Neither do we act from carnal or politicized anger, for "the wrath of man does not produce the righteousness of God" (James 1:20) Acquire the spirit of anger and a thousand souls around you will be stressed.

Instead, we temper our current urgency—and our legitimate outrage—with a two-thousand year witness that the Church may be at her best when she is most *irrelevant* to culture, most out-of-step with its seething depersonalization and deicide, its illogicality and crude art. It's the Saints

who make the Church relevant in any culture: do they not emerge in greater numbers from within the Church when she stands in lesser esteem with the State?

Humanizing God, Deifying Man

There may always be the temptation for Jerusalem to copulate with Athens—to dance and wink with worldliness to the point of compromise. For ruining Christian witness, seduction works better than persecution. Modern Christianity, unmoored from this early history, may always feel a tug to *humanize God*—to filter the central mystery of Christian life through popular culture to improve its presentation, digestion, accessibility. To "humanize God" is to adopt the art forms, and thought categories, and doctrinal priorities of cosmopolitan sensibilities, for the purpose of "speaking the language" of those one is trying to reach.

But humanizing God has already been done, hasn't it? In the Person of "Christ Jesus," who "emptied Himself, taking on the form of a servant, made in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:7). God has already *come down*; all that remains is for each man to be *lifted up*. Consider that sweeping reference in the Anaphora of the Liturgy of St Basil: "Though He was God before all the ages, yet He appeared upon earth and dwelt among men and was incarnate of a holy virgin and emptied Himself, taking on the form of a servant, becoming conformed to the body of our lowliness, that He might make us conformable to the image of His glory." The glorious motion of Christ—lowering down in order to lift up—has already been accomplished: "It is finished" (John 19:30).

If there is a work, then, a purpose, a goal for each local Christian community, surely it is not to humanize God but to deify man. We speak here of an attitude, a frame of mind, a way of walking through the world that sees the Church as *the* organism, the one fully trustworthy repository and conduit, of truly transfiguring grace; a still place of ceaseless motion toward the singular goal of deathless life in Christ. Not simply a calendar item for Sundays, not a social organization nor a shop for moral tune-ups, each parish or monastic community is to be in sweet and shattering confrontation with God. Divinity expressed through physicality: when describing the Church,

the Apostle Paul ties “the truth” (John 14:6) to the tangible touchstones of “pillar and foundation” (1 Tim. 3:15).

This, then, is the abiding creed of the Christian: God is God and I am not. “Thou alone art holy” (Rev. 15:4). We are from below, He is from above; we are of this world, He is not of this world; He became a partaker of human nature, yes, but He did not stop there, like some paratrooper who descends behind enemy lines not to rescue the captives but only to commiserate with what it feels like to be one. No, He partook of human nature so that we may become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4).

Creed and Coexistence

In his 1936 essay “The Crack Up,” F. Scott Fitzgerald—not a father of the Church but a father of good prose—wrote this: “The test of first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.” Christians can walk through this world both close-fisted around the scandalous exclusivity of their creed, and open-handed in charity toward all who do not profess it.

Genuine coexistence is not the suppression of differences that divide creed from creed, but an open marketplace where differences exist within a shared presumption that citizens will not kill each other because of them. And Christians are not troglodytes who fearfully keep to our caves with a plea to the world not to hurt us. Instead—with passion tempered by peacefulness—we participate. We engage: the salt spreads forth from its shaker, the light shines forth from its flame. We are beggars sharing with other beggars where to find Bread. Noteworthy that when unjustly struck in the face, Christ replied, “Why do you strike Me?” (John 18:23)—as if appealing to some shared higher humanity in His enemies, some common values of fraternity, liberty, and reasonableness upon which healthy civilizations are built.

Genuine coexistence means that ideas are allowed to rise and fall on their own merits—a liberality which was not always afforded to Christians in those early centuries, and arguably is eroding now. But since Christianity is a good idea with a core of transcendence, it rose up in just over 300 years—

amid hostile conditions and maybe even because of them—to become the dominant faith of an empire.

History aside, it's modern man whom we must tend to now. By "modern man," we mean an understanding of the human being dominant since the Enlightenment—that 18th-century European intellectual and philosophical movement favoring reason over faith, skepticism over belief, rationalism over religion, the science book over the Good Book. Rejected was not so much God as God's *nearness*. Unsurprisingly, God now was felt to be very far away; and the new existential crisis that filled that void within man—for how can we who are made live apart from our Maker?—has been called *despair*.

A Story

For fifty years, researchers have surveyed incoming college freshman on topics ranging from their choice of majors to their worldview. Consider this detail from a recent survey involving 141,189 first-year students attending about 200 public and private institutions around the nation: today's freshmen can lay claim to the unprecedented superlative of, historically, being the most willing incoming class on campus to shut down speech they find offensive.

After learning that data, a parish priest in the American South—with children in college—contacted a local university hoping to set up a cordial meeting with any professor who publicly held positions different from his own. Why? Not to argue, not to battle perspectives, not to debate issues, but to discover if the genuine coexistence of ideas is still possible.

He found a Ph.D. in the Department of Psychology who was basically the pastor's photo-negative: the pastor straight, the professor gay; the pastor Christian, the professor atheist; the pastor traditional, the professor progressive; the pastor pre-modern, the professor post-modern.

To the professor's enormous credit—in this aloof, depersonalized age—he replied to an e-mail sent by this priest whom he'd never met nor heard of.

The meeting occurred in the teacher's office on a sunny Tuesday. After being invited to sit down, Father asked this alternative, atheistic, post-modern, sexually-experimental professor before him if he encountered any resistance on campus to his publicly-stated opinions and lifestyle. No, he replied. Some of his former students had, but that was mostly in the past.

Next question. Professor, do you feel that publicly-stated opinions contrary to yours are welcome here on campus? Yes, they are. Is true coexistence between different ideas welcome? Yes. The priest defined *dignity in dialogue*—"the vigorous but courteous, honest but humane exchange of conflicting opinions and ideas that does not disrupt peaceful coexistence between persons who hold those conflicting opinions"—and he asked if such dignity was present on campus. Yes, it is.

"But," the professor continued, "dignity in dialogue is possible, unless..."—here, a pause—"...unless a person publicly expresses opinions that attack me or people like me. If you publicly oppose my identity, then you're saying I don't have a right to exist, and I am going to have a problem with that."

A pivotal moment in the discussion, this. The professor didn't know it, but he was about to reveal the despair of modern man. After a few more questions, the professor admitted that he makes no distinction between his *humanity* and his *identity*—his identity *is* his humanity. This blur is a post-modern technique. Why is it consequential? It means that reality is not real; truth is not objective, but only individualized experience; one is what one feels.

The consequences are staggering: if one identifies with or as anything which our culture not long ago sanely called "deviant," and one's identity is one's humanity, then any criticism or opposition of deviancy—which is what the common humanity of a culture is supposed to do—is criticism of and opposition against that person. If your identity is unpopular, then you're convinced your very essence is unpopular; if your identity lies marginalized and unaffirmed, then you assume your core sense of self is marginalized and deprived of affirmation; if there are those who do not think what you identify

with or as should exist, then no other conclusion is as inevitable: *I should not exist.*

Wide lies the detritus when identity is not distinguished from humanity, when *what a person does* is not distinct from *who a person is*: for there are broken hearts and beaten souls everywhere who don't believe they are made for anything more than the poor performance that their weak wills can muster. Among the many gifts for which we can thank the Apostle Paul is Romans 7, where he distinguishes the alien "law of sin" in his members from his "inmost self," which he identifies as "the law of my mind," or *nous*.

While the earnest professor spoke, the priest considered that the humanity with which the professor identifies is fallen. The man leaned back in his leather chair *content to be his sin nature*, as if his lips could almost form the horror: my fallen nature *is* who I am; sin is my essence; I am my passions. Father looked across the desk in silent grief: behold modern man in his despair.

Solution

This despair might be where the Christianity of yesterday can make its greatest impact today—an imprint not dependent upon (but certainly not opposed to) favorable laws and friendly politicians. Even as we grieve the downward spiral of the kinds of values we believe to be good for the citizenry, don't we also have something healing to offer those nauseated by this fall? Are we not beggars sharing with other beggars where to find Bread?

The United States is suffering from a frightening uptick in "deaths of despair"—death by drug overdose, alcoholism, suicide. What is a Christian contribution to be brought to this troubled marketplace? To cry out, "Wait! Something good can be done with your despair; your pain can receive a voice; we can sit together in that place between feeling the wound and reaching for potentially lethal relief."

The Gospel of Christ can help us cope with the reality from which we all occasionally want to escape: we learn to see ourselves as His crucified

gaze sees us, to make peace with our lives the way they are, and with the spouses and families they are with. A Christian contribution to coexistence involves a radical realigning with reality, humbly accepting an immanence that, by the grace of God, can be transformed or transcended.

We finish, then, with good news. To the dazed patrons of the marketplace of ideas comes the firm but gentle voice of Christian history: “You are not your passions; your sin is not your future; you are not trapped; what you have done is not the sum total of who you are. Your problem, O modern man, is not that you think too highly of yourself, but that of yourself you think too poorly.”

Strict with ourselves, we are merciful with others. Surely curious to those who use the Bible as the weapon of choice in the culture wars is the fact that the early Christian evangelists did not quote Scripture extensively to potential converts (unless, perhaps, conversing with Jews). Tertullian put it succinctly: “No one turns to our literature who is not already Christian.”

Instead, there just seemed to be something self-evidently beautiful about the pure Christian message. So why can the Christian peacefully coexist with the neighbor who’s having trouble peacefully coexisting with him? Because it’s not about forcing a conversion, but about unveiling the beauty of Christ, Who loved His enemies to the end.

The professor described above organizes an LGBTQ+ conference each year on his campus that celebrates deviant lifestyles. “We invite some Christian groups who are supportive of our lifestyles,” he said, “because we feel they represent the best of Christianity.”

For the first time in the conversation, the priest pushed back: “Is it possible that I—your photo-negative—could speak at your conference, affirm our common humanity, extend kindness to your group, call for an end to physical and rhetorical violence against those of your sexual preference, while also professing salvific ideas awkwardly contrary to your own as the lot of us share a cup of tea afterward? Is it possible *that* could represent the best of Christianity?”

After thoughtful silence, the professor replied, “Yes, I suppose it could be.”