

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Hörer Des Wortes

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It is instructive to reflect on the apparent implausibility—not to say, the scandal—of the Bible's claims to a favored position for a particular people within history; the claim represents an affront to both the Perennial Philosophy and the widespread religious assumptions of mankind.

The biblical claim of a *special* revelation to a *particular* people is deeply offensive for a number of reasons, but chiefly its appeal to history.

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, then, as Christians do, that Revelation and Redemption enter human experience through contingent historical facts and events will seem to inhibit most men's access to Revelation and Redemption. For this reason some of the Church's earliest critics—Celsus, for instance—and the thinkers of the Enlightenment rejected the biblical and Christian claim; they contend that man's relationship to God must be kept quite separate from history.

Now, contrast this classical and Enlightenment assumption with the last line of a poem the 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." This is a pretty firm rejection, it seems to me, of that classical Greek hypothesis.

We believers 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 a seemingly improbable handful of Jews.

This is what I have called the apparent implausibility—or scandal—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, 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 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. Although its adherents seem almost never to admit the fact, the Perennial Philosophy *chooses* timelessness. It bears a fundamental bias against time and what it believes (understandably, we admit) to be the ravages of time.

This is also, I think, a Scholastic bias; the Perennial Philosophy attempts to get past the "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 short, it is the scholastic extension of a classical Greek prejudice.

The Christian disagrees. He asserts that 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 quality of human existence is clear in certain features of consciousness that tie it—in respect to transcendent experience—closely to history.

A man's consciousness cannot be separated from certain contingent "facts," such as his socially conveyed impulse to measure time, the stimulant structure of the grammar in his inherited language, and the free assumption of responsibility for his historical choices. These things connect human consciousness, formally and at its deepest level, to the experience of history.

The ability to assess one's consciousness with respect to the ongoing sequence of time and the incorporation of memory into interpretive narrative are among the most distinguishing features of the human being—arguably *the* features most indicative of the metaphysical difference between human language and the communicative sounds used by animals.

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 in this world, would do so through the contingencies of history. Otherwise, why did He make man a hearer and a watcher?