



His Beatitude, Metropolitan Tikhon, offers the following reflection on the recent discussion that was generated by Fr. Robert Arida's article , "Never-Changing Gospel; Ever-Changing Culture," which was posted on this blog.

I

In the "About" section of the Wonder Blog, a publication of the Department of Youth, Young Adults and Campus Ministries of the Orthodox Church in America, it is stated that the purpose of the blog is "... to spur discussion, both online and off, and provide material for those engaged in campus and young adult ministry" and "... help provide a 'good defense' for our faith, hope and love." In spite of this stated purpose, many have questioned the article's usefulness, requested to know the authority under which it was published and have even called for its removal. Others have recognized its positive contributions to the complex and difficult theme of the relationship between Gospel and culture.

In light of the ensuing lively and informative discussion, and in consultation with my brothers on the Holy Synod, I am instructing the editors of Wonder to replace the lead article in question with my present reflection.

II

As a preface to my own reflection below, I would like to offer a clarification on the question of oversight. Although the Holy Synod takes the sacred confession of the holy dogmas of the Orthodox Church with the greatest of seriousness, it is not charged in the matter of theologoumena and areas requiring pastoral discretion and economia to function as a sort of "thought police" but rather, each bishop is entrusted with leading and guiding his flock within the light of Christ, according to the commandments of the Gospel and within the norms of the holy canons and the teachings of the Holy Fathers. On occasion, the Holy Synod does issue directives and encyclicals on various timely subjects and themes that require a clear statement to the flock.

In reference to the discussion of contemporary issues related to marriage and sexuality, I would direct the reader to several documents which have been published by the Holy Synod and are available on the OCA website:

- 1) [Encyclical on Marriage](#)
- 2) [Synodal Affirmation on Marriage, Family, Sexuality and the Sanctity of Marriage](#)
- 3) [Synodal Affirmation of the Mystery of Marriage](#)

In reference to the specific topic of homosexuality, which is presumed by many of the respondents to Fr. Robert's article to be the primary issue of discussion, I would draw the reader's attention to the following paragraph from the third document above:

In light of the decisions rendered on June 26, 2013 by the Supreme Court of the United States of America with regard to same-sex marriage, we, the members of the Holy Synod of Bishops of the Orthodox Church in America, reaffirm that which had been stated in June 1992, namely that marriage involves the union of one man and one woman, as divinely revealed and experienced in the sacramental life of the Church. As such, the Church does not, and can not, condone or accept marriages apart from those involving one man and one woman who seal their relationship in the all-embracing love of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Synod has also recently blessed the re-activation of the Department of Pastoral Life, which is in the process of being re-evaluated and will begin its work in the very near future. It seems that the present discussion on Gospel and culture is one that would benefit from a more in-depth analysis than can be provided on a blog. It will be my recommendation that the issues raised here be one of the first areas to be addressed by the Department of Pastoral Life and that all those who have contributed to this present discussion be invited to participate.

III

I would also like to offer some preliminary reflections on the present discussion. In a paradoxical way, our discussions on "culture" seem to take place primarily at conferences, in books and articles and on websites and blogs. All of these, while certainly part of our culture, tend to remove us spiritually from the very context that we are speaking about.

I am conscious of this because I am writing these words as I sit in Boston Children's Hospital with my nephew Tyler, who is today recovering from a ten (10) hour surgery yesterday to correct his severe scoliosis. Tyler is 16 years old and has undergone seventeen (17) surgeries on his back over the last 7 years. Prior to that, he lived his life in a plaster cast which was necessary to correct the severe curvature of his spine and prevent the puncturing of his internal organs. By God's grace, and the prayers of many, yesterday's surgery, involving the removal of expandable metal rods and the permanent fusion of his vertebrae, went successfully and is hopefully the last such surgery he will have to endure.

It is in contexts such as this that we most acutely face the reality of the relationship between Gospel and Culture. When a human being either undergoes such difficulties or is charged with ministering or helping someone in such a situation, the discussion ceases to be merely academic and becomes very real and immediate. I would not want us to lose sight of the human person and his salvation in Christ when we talk about "culture" and its relationship to the Church.

This does not negate the importance of knowledge, study and reflection. Others will have more academic and historical expertise on broad topics such as "Christ and Culture." The discussion raised in this specific blog discussion is not new. For a very concise exposition of the Church's approach to "culture," I would direct you to the excellent book, *Ancient Christian Wisdom and Aaron Beck's Cognitive Therapy* by Hieromonk Alexios [Trader]. Although the book focuses on a specific modern therapeutic approach within the context of the patristic witness, the approach taken by the author could serve as a model for an Orthodox approach to many other disciplines.

The first chapter of that book lays out the three general approaches taken in early Christianity to the practice of medicine: (1) the Tertullian model: resistance, rejection and enmity, 2) the model of Valentinus the Gnostic: absorption, manipulation and merger and 3) the Patristic model of Clement of Alexandria: selection, integration and transfiguration. The author chooses this last model as the most

legitimate and the most reflective of a patristic approach of discerning openness. I offer the final words of that first chapter for your reflection:

The remaining option is the approach seen in figures such as Saint Basil the Great and Clement of Alexandria, an approach of discerning openness that selects, incorporates, and transfigures. This approach is implicitly asymmetric and hierarchal by virtue of the ontological value of salvation in Christ in contrast with the value of temporary psychological well-being. With this approach, Christian teachings act as a filter admitting some concepts, rejecting others, and in other instances suggesting alternatives. To be successful, this patristic approach requires clarity in terms of a patristic mindset capable of placing valuable insights from cognitive therapy into their appropriate niches within a patristic worldview and system of values. This is no simple task. Immersed as we are in a scientific worldview, our thought patterns are often unwittingly guided in a direction quite different from that of the Fathers. What was for them a natural perception must often be for us a matter of deliberate and continuous choice.¹

We do, however, have the privilege of being able to choose to be methodologically guided by the Fathers on the sojourn before us. An Orthodox Christian theological worldview can be outlined and serve as a patristic basis for evaluating the implicit philosophical worldview of cognitive therapy. Relevant pastoral advice and ascetic teachings by the Fathers can be selected and arranged in order to form a patristic context for examining discrete components of cognitive therapy. In this way, we can strive to follow along the bold patristic path of those conquerors of death into the promised land of the Church where “the mystical trumpeters of the Spirit”² proclaim the truth of our faith: “all things are possible to him that believeth”³ — Egyptian gold can be forged into a censer by a Christian hand.

If one were to replace “cognitive therapy” with any of the other philosophies and approaches that one finds in our world, perhaps the suggested patristic approach could be used effectively, at the hands of experienced priests and laymen, so that those positive elements of the culture that can be harmonized to the eternal Gospel of Christ might be used in a way that can build the bridges necessary to reach those who do not know Christ, choose to ignore Him or reject Him altogether, much as Saint Paul invoked the unknown God in speaking to the Athenians⁴.

IV

In our Orthodox context, we are very good at speaking to each other, but we are less successful when trying to speak to those “who are not my people” (Hosea 4) in order to make them disciples of Christ. We must be willing to admit that, in many ways, the earthly representatives of the Orthodox Church - bishops, priests, and lay folk - have failed to address the culture in a meaningful way. We struggle to have a united ecclesiastical voice on both the global and local levels. With rare exceptions, our voice is weak in academic, cultural and political contexts. Perhaps this is due to our own human weakness, spiritual slothfulness, and inability to communicate the truth of the Gospel to the world around us.

But perhaps we need to begin by listening more and asking ourselves if we are truly able to hear the questions that are being asked by our college students, by our relatives, by the strangers we meet on the street, by our neighbors? On a blog, where anonymity is often the rule, it is difficult to discern who is speaking. I am grateful that the clergy who have responded to Fr. Robert’s article have all identified

¹ Cf. Nicholas Woderstorff, *Reason within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids: 1984), pages 68, 76 and 108.

² Glory at Vespers for the feast of the Holy Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical council in plagal tone 2.

³ Mark 9:23.

⁴ Acts 17:23

themselves and have commented in a Christian and respectful manner. I do not know whether the other commenters represent the target audience of the blog (young adults and college students) or not. But I would encourage all of us to open our ears to their voices and questions, so that we might help them to more effectively resist the temptations of the secular world and make their own the truth of Christ and the Gospel.

In our Orthodox circles, we like to debate issues such as the proper English translation for exclamations at the Gospel: are we to “listen” to the Holy Gospel or are we to “hear” it? Rather than endlessly debating the semantics of the matter, I would suggest that, whether we are assisting a relative who has undergone surgery or responding to the pointed questions raised by our youth, we ought to pick one translation or the other and simply do it (James 1:22).