

Our Word About God

A newspaper of Orthodox Theology from the students of the Institute for Orthodox Christian Studies, Cambridge

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Welcome to the second issue of our newspaper!

For various reasons we have decided to make the newspaper monthly. That means that it will be published every first Tuesday of the month.

New in this issue is a list of our contributors on page three. In addition, apologies for a typographic mistake in the previous issue. In Miss Tamar Gogvadze's article: 'On the Veneration of Icons' (page 3), 'orthodox' ought to have read 'Orthodox'.

We hope you will enjoy our newspaper and we are looking forward to seeing you at IOCS.

Merry Christmas!

Editorial

The Pursuit of Wisdom: Holistic Education in the Classical, Biblical, and Patristic Tradition.

by Dr Marcus Pledsted

'Every scribe who has been instructed into the kingdom of heaven is like a man that is a householder, who brings forth out of his treasure things new and old' (Mt 13:52).

Any attempt to articulate a vision of holistic education for the betterment of human beings and the societies they create must of necessity engage in a process of *ressourcement*. Such a 'return to the sources' of educational theory and practice is to be undertaken not as an exercise in archaeology but as a creative re-appropriation for our own time of the treasures of the past. I shall in this brief article present some reflections, structured around the theme of wisdom, on the classical, biblical, and patristic vision of education. I shall also offer a number of pointers as to how this vision of education, of *paideia*, might constructively influence our own educational efforts in the twenty-first century.

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the whole work of the greatest of classical philosophers, Plato, is structured around the theme of education or *paideia* – the training, formation, and discipline necessary for the vision and apprehension of the true nature of the universe that brings about the re-integration of the soul and the consequent transformation of society. Even the *Republic*, ostensibly a work on the ordering of civil society, is in fact in essence a treatise on education. Plato has no illusion that one can change society without first changing, empowering, and transforming its members. Our primary concern, he reminds us, must always remain the human soul. Philosophy, the love and pursuit of wisdom, was never, for Plato, a process of abstract speculation or the mere accumulation of information. It was, rather, a way of life requiring intense ascetic effort and the active cultivation of virtue. It also required a certain detachment from material anxieties summed up in Socrates' rhetorical question, 'Is not the love of wisdom a practice of death'. This daily and nightly remembrance of the time of the soul's separation from the body is held to free the immortal soul from all the fears and concerns of the material and temporal world and to allow access to the underlying reality of things, to the divine world.

Education, for Plato (and of course his master, Socrates) was about opening up the largely untapped but almost limitless potentialities of the human spirit. It was not something done to

the individual but rather something which allowed something to happen. The educator, in this schema, is a facilitator, one who helps through his maeutic method, his pedagogical midwifery, the individual to know themselves and the world around them in a direct and unmediated experience of knowledge. Education allows one to be what one is. It looses the bonds of materiality and permits the soul to fulfil its deepest and most innate yearning or desire (*eros*) for the Good. Without *paideia*, Socrates tells us, the soul is rather like one of a group of men shackled since childhood in a cave, able to see only the shadows cast on the cave wall from a world they cannot see. Naturally enough they take these shadows for reality – for it is the only reality they know. But if one of these men is freed he will at first be unable to recognise what he sees in the world outside but will rather be dazzled and blinded by the sun and will only be after a long process of training and discipline that he will be able to gaze upon the that sun, source of light in that truly real world. In this most powerful and poetic of similes the whole Platonic vision of education is encapsulated. The cave simile shows us that the aim of education is the transformative vision and apprehension of the highest good, of reality in all its splendour and terror. All else that Plato writes on the theme of education (and indeed in general) is directed towards the realisation of this vision. As in all areas of life, one has to know where one is heading if one is ever to get there.

This is a consummately holistic understanding of the purpose and goal of education. Education is conceived of in terms of freedom, particularly freedom from anything that might hinder the soul from realising its true nature and wholeness. Education is seen as a quest for transforming and perfecting wisdom, a quest that involves the training and application of both soul and body. It is freedom to be what we are, to realise the highest potentialities of human existence. As Plato's own disciple, Aristotle, expressed this new humanism: 'We must not listen to those who advise us "being men to think human thoughts, and being mortal to think mortal thoughts," but must put on immortality as much as is possible and strain every nerve to live according to that best part of us, which, being small in bulk, yet much more in its power and honour surpasses all else.'

The intimate connection between wisdom and *paideia* traced in this brief sketch of the classical vision of education is something we find *a fortiori* in the biblical and classical wisdom traditions. Very much in dialogue with the Hellenic wisdom tradition, we see in the Old Testament (with the so-called 'Apocrypha') the emergence of a very distinct conception of the relationship between wisdom and *paideia*. Some of the most intriguing and perplexing texts in Scripture are those in which wisdom is presented as a quasi-personal figure. A good example here is Proverbs 8 in which she (and the language is undeniably feminine) is presented as being close to, but not identical with, God, possessed as the beginning or of his ways, of his creation. She was present at the forming of the heavens and the earth: 'I was with him forming all things and was delighted every day, playing before him at all times; Playing in the world and my delights were to be with the children of men' (Prov. 8:30-31). The Book of Wisdom calls her 'a breath of the most power of God, a pure effulgence flowing from the glory of the Almighty [...] the brightness of the everlasting light, the unspotted mirror of the power of God, and the image of his goodness. Being one she can do all things, and remaining in herself she makes all

things new, entering in all ages into holy souls and making them friends of God, and prophets' (Wisdom 7:25-27).

In both of the passages quoted above, wisdom emerges as a way of expressing God's self-revelation in and to the world, bringing the world into union with himself. The means by which wisdom brings humanity to God is invariably treated in terms of the divine *paideia*, the formation, discipline, or education of man by God in which God gives himself to man to make him what he is. The Book of Wisdom, again, puts this very clearly: 'For she goes about seeking such as are worthy of her, and she shows herself to them favourably in the ways, and meets them in every thought. For the beginning of her is the most true desire of *paideia*. And the care of *paideia* is love: and love is the keeping of her laws: and the keeping of her laws is the firm foundation of incorruption; and incorruption brings us near to God. Therefore the desire of wisdom brings us to the kingdom' (Wisdom 6:16-20).

The New Testament picks up on the well-established wisdom-tradition of Israel. The passage with which I have headed this article similarly makes the point that *paideia* has the capacity to bring us to the kingdom. Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus is depicted as the archetypal teacher, a depiction bolstered by his implicit identification of himself with the figure of wisdom adumbrated in the Old Testament (e.g. Mt. 23:37; Luke 13:34). This is an identification made clear by St Paul in his confession of Christ as the 'Wisdom and power of God' (1 Cor 1.24).

Moving to look at the patristic response to all this, it was recognised at a very early stage that the biblical depiction of wisdom, particularly in the texts already mentioned, pointed to something more than just a human attainment or divine attribute. It was, rather, a way of expressing the nature of the relationship between God and man in terms of *paideia*.

(end of part one)

On the Veneration of Icons

by Miss Tamar Goguadze

So through veneration of icons we respect their divine nature which is not separated from their human nature. The Father God and the Holy Spirit are still invisible. They can be symbolised but not depicted and the Orthodox Church does not have their icons.

The image of Christ is the image of the image of God. St. John of Damascus says: "I do not adore the creation rather than the Creator, but I adore the one who became a creature, who was formed as I was who clothed Himself in creation without

weakening or departing from His divinity." Veneration is an expression of our love and respect which goes to the prototype. This is the way to express our love bodily and the way of giving a spiritual kiss to Christ Himself. Orthodox Christians see the icon of God in each person as we all are created in the image and likeness of God and it does not mean that we adore each-other but through the image of each person we adore the Spirit of God which lives in all of us. If we fail to see the image of God in other people, we won't find that image in icons. That is why the deacon or priest censes not only icons during the liturgy but he censes us as well as live images of God. Iconography is directly connected with the meaning of Christ's incarnation. As the Logos

became visible, as the icon is the visible word of God, it always tells us about God's divinity and always teaches us through the grace of God. The holy Basil says: "Why should not we bow down to honour the image, not as God, but as the image of God incarnate?"

Icons are the visualisation of God's divine presence. As Fr. Steven Bigham says even in the Old Testament we clearly see "a tension between the refusal to visualise God and a great desire to see him". This desire exists in all of us as we live in the visual world, and we need a visual touchable link to God. That is why Christ has been incarnate, and that is why we have the Church as the image of heaven on earth. "As the apostle Paul says: "Now we see through a glass darkly" (1Cor.13.12). To refuse to venerate icons means not only to refuse to express you respect for Christ Himself, but it is an attempt to escape from yourself, from the limitations of the visible world; to imagine yourself as a holy one who does not need any visual link to God and is able to be in direct relationship with God without anything earthly. Such an attempt can easily lead to falsehood as it is a form of pride. Nobody can

see God in a glass clearly, because we all have darkened this glass by our sins.

Icons are the body of the divine nature in our material world from which we can not escape. Icons are visual manifestations of the presence of God and partakers of His divinity on earth. We need this manifestation for our relationship with God. Through icons we worship the true God, while idol-worshippers worship false gods which they have created themselves. It is a personal choice whether to feel the work of the grace of God through icons or to fall into idolatry. It is an aspect of the free will which was granted to all of us by God.



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The grace of God works through icons when they are considered as the image of God or His saints. If we are afraid of falling into idolatry through the veneration of icons and we place them above human height it is more likely that our fear can become an idol itself and can make us forget our faith and love for Christ. The fear to fall into idolatry is the sign of the lack of a secure faith. If we believe that Christ is the true God who became matter in order to show us the way of life which leads to salvation, we can not be afraid to venerate His image for He is holy and His image shares His holiness. Father Steven Bigham says: "a "yes" to icons is also "yes" to the incarnation, and a "no" to icons is also a "no" to the reality of incarnation".

Life in the Lord: From "Sinship" to Sonship

by Dr Bob Kahn

Our goal in life is to participate in the life of God rather than to draw God to participate in our lives. That is to say, we seek to participate in the life of the Trinity rather than to demand that God empower us to implement our current wishes. The difference is rather profound as far as our understanding of religion is concerned: God becomes the focus of a desire to be with Him. The difference is also striking as far as our understanding of self is concerned: We begin to live for others rather than for ourselves. Such statements have a primary validity as existential experiences open to every human being rather than as theoretical propositions of enlightenment available to a few.

What does it mean "to participate in the life of the Trinity?" With a single phrase, the search for God becomes a living quest of believing Christians rather than a frustrating critique of how religion is lived (or not lived) in the world or even a concern with contemporary Christian life. Life in the Trinity is a fellowship in which the relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit draws us into the life of God, away from a focus on our own personalities and hopes. The old prayer, "Lord, I give to you today everything I think or do or say," becomes an entry point into the full form of The Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Our "sinship" becomes a valid point of entry to God's creation, sonship and spiritual gifts.

Is such a perspective realistic? Can a denial of self and an

awareness of our sins be a legitimate standing place in which to begin to experience living with the Lord? My limited experience suggests that the opposite perspective—seeking to be sinless is both impossible and debilitating. Instead of offering to God who we are, we are tempted to pretend that a self-help perspective will somehow move us through life's problems. Yet in all honesty what we need is merely sufficient awareness of our problems to know that we are not capable of solving them by restructuring our personalities, but rather, must rely on God to implement changes in our lifestyles.

An experience of participation in the life of the Trinity is made readily available to us in communion at the eucharist. Such daring to be drawn into God's presence, such willingness to experience the extent of God's love for us, enables each of us to be alone with the Trinity and yet also alive to every other human being and to creation itself. By focusing our lives on how the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit relate to each other we are drawn into that relationship through the doorway of confession in which we acknowledge we are sinners.



Musing Out Loud: A Patron Saint for the Institute

by Dr Grant White

I doubt that readers of this newspaper need to be told of the importance of the saints for Orthodox Christianity. Intercessors, role models, signs of contradiction, prophets: the holy women and men of the Church serve God and us in many different ways. Authentic holiness does not conform to the holier-than-thou-ness of our culture's stereotype, but follows

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You are most welcome to come to the Vespers Service every Tuesday (no service on Federation Worship Tuesdays), Wednesday and Thursday 16:45 that take place at the library of IOCS, Wesley House.

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the leading of the Holy Spirit, which “blows where it chooses” (John 3:8, NRSV). Saints reveal to us the possibility of what God’s saving, transfiguring love can do. Such women and men offer hope and encouragement to people today who hunger and thirst for a deeper meaning to their lives than what our consumerist culture offers.

Given that holy women and men occupy such a place in Orthodox Christianity, I am a little puzzled that the Institute does not have a patron saint. This is no criticism, of course, of the people involved in naming this place. But I wonder if the time has come to consider adopting a patron saint. As the Institute continues to grow and develop, I think it might well be important to have a patron on whose prayers we can rely, whose feast day or days we can celebrate together. Such things help to build community, they help to shape and deepen identity.

The obvious question, of course, is: who? Because we are a pan-Orthodox institute, it seems to me that our patron saint should likewise be venerated by all Orthodox. Does this criterion limit the possibilities to someone from the patristic era? St. Basil the Great comes to mind, and he has additional significance for Orthodoxy in the United Kingdom in that for many years St. Basil’s House in London was the headquarters of the Fellowship of

St. Alban and St. Sergius. If we were to look to an early English saint, St. Theodore of Tarsus might be a candidate. As the eighth Archbishop of Canterbury, St. Theodore put the English church on a firm administrative footing. He also promoted education. Last but not least, he was a native of the East who came to the West, and who served the Church here ably and fruitfully. As

Archbishop of Canterbury, St. Theodore is venerated by both Anglicans and Orthodox.

There are other possibilities, to be sure. I would welcome any suggestions our readers might have. Please e-mail me at: gsw26@cam.ac.uk.

Gloria in Excelsis Deo!

by Mr Vasileios Stamatelatos

‘Glory to God in highest’¹ The Angel said on the nativity night, ‘and on earth his peace for men on whom his favour rests’² Reflecting on this passage and trying to understand its meaning I asked a friend of mine what she thinks. “When the angel said ‘Glory to the God in highest and on earth his peace’³ he said that so people will be peaceful when they try to buy something and somebody else got it before them. Any other season of the year they would fight over it!”⁴ After I stopped laughing, I realised that there were elements of truth in what my friend said. It made me wonder what Christmas is really about and what it has come to be.

So, what is Christmas? I believe that if you ask five people, they will all say something different.

Colourful lights, Christmas trees and Christmas decorations seem

to be everywhere. Everybody is buying presents for his or her family, and they certainly expect to receive a few! There is even traditional food for Christmas: Christmas pudding, mince pies and other delicacies.

Christmas is the Celebration of the Birth of Christ. But do we stop to consider what the fact of Christ’s Birth really is, and what impact it had and has on our lives and on our nature as human beings?

As we know, we believe in God as Trinity, and we also believe that the triune God created human beings. So we have God on the one hand and human on the other. For some reason (that this article’s purpose is not to investigate) God created something able to take part in His nature (to become Gods by grace, not by essence) and come into communion with Him; that is to say to have relationship with God. But the human race at one point decided not to turn towards God. And, God being the source of all life, that had the result that we all experience even today since the fall of human; corruption and death. But God couldn’t leave that with out doing anything about it. He became human. The second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God, conceived the human nature; he became Christ; perfect human and perfect God. And by His death and resurrection he gave the prospect for us to be resurrected one day too.

Do we ever consider that there would be no salvation if God didn’t become incarnate? Do we ever consider that if God did not receive the whole human nature, that is to say did not become human as we are, we would not be able to overcome our mortality? What do all these Christmas traditions have to do with all that? Nothing? Maybe.

I think that we Christians see all these traditions from the point of view that

they are human celebrations of the Birth of Christ. Other people see them from a secular point of view, not connecting them with the facts of God’s incarnation.

I like Christmas. I like Christmas decorations and carols. But the fact that they have been commercialised so much is awful. I remember last weekend I visited my friends at Milton Keynes. They took me to a garden centre because they wanted to buy something. While there, I was attracted by the beauty of some orchids they had for sale. To my disappointment they were too expensive. The label said: “XMAS EPIPHYTE ORCHIDS 29.90”. When I showed the label to my friend, complaining about the price of the orchid, he pointed at the label and specifically at the word ‘XMAS’⁵ and told me: ‘That’s the expensive word’! How true this is!

I wish people would see the true side of Christmas. That they would see more to it than just buying gifts and decorating their homes appropriately. Lets make a start and this Christmas try to think more about what Christmas really is. And when we do, we will really have the peace that the Angel proclaimed to the Shepherds.

Merry Christmas to all!

Merry Christmas