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Scattered Thoughts and the One God (Fr. Stephen Freeman)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)



“My thoughts ar scattered...”

It’s an observation I make frequently to myself, and one that I hear constantly from others. It is not that we think about *many* things (though we do), but we think *many* things about *everything* often with contradictions, questions, competing allegiances and inner struggles. The inner world of modern man is a noisy place.



This makes it very hard for us to hear the theme of the One in Scripture:

“I and the Father are One.”

“That they all may be one, even as I and the Father are one.”

“There is One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of all...”

The theme carries forward into the Church:

“I believe in One Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church...”

Such words have a meaning for us, but that meaning is most often a distortion of their intent – for our experience of the One is almost wholly lacking. Our thoughts are scattered.

Our thoughts are scattered and at the same time they scatter everything they touch. Dmitru Staniloae describes this scattering:

Sense perception isn't preoccupied in finding ties between the *logoi* of visible things [their inner created meaning], or even of viewing something in its unitary integrity, fully placed in its own *logos*; but it limits its interest to a partial aspect, drawn by the pleasure which this aspect promises it. It doesn't work with a broad horizon, but it always sees only one aspect and forgets all the rest. The result is obvious. In this

way, by the feeling led by pleasure, the world is divided into numberless, unrelated aspects without a tie between them.... The mind which serves feeling is itself bent toward various singular aspects, and isn't concerned with the relationships between them, instead of seeing the unitary system of the reason which penetrates the world, and by this system the one God... [the mind also] forgets what it already knew, being divided into unrelated acts of knowing, because every moment it has received the impression of something isolated from everything else. This is the so-called scattering of the mind which the guarding of the mind, recommended by Christian asceticism, must deliver it from.... But this tears its nature to pieces; because instead of being kept continually in the equilibrium of its functions, it is abandoned successively, a prey to the extremes which are self-contradictory by their exaggerated exclusivity. Man is no longer a unitary being, the same at every moment of his life. The forgetting of God also has as a result the forgetting of self... *Orthodox Spirituality* (Kindle Locations 1655 ff.)

When we speak of God as "One," we fail to know what we mean. Our mind dashes about from the one of the mathematicians to notions of Trinity and to many various places. When Christ prays "that they may be one as we are," we easily race forward to notions of a future unity of denominations or to some already existing "invisible" unity.

This scattering of the mind makes it difficult for us to perceive true Beauty. Beauty, as taught by the fathers, includes the relationship of the whole and the relatedness of all things. The fragmentation of our culture is one of the primary difficulties in seeing the Truth of our existence. We see elements of Beauty but often see the world at war with itself, failing to understand or know its proper meaning. People see a fragmented beauty of the human body, removed from the truth of our personhood, seen only from the point of view of our own gratification or various other distortions. These fragments are not therefore ugly, but their distortions only render the world more fragmented.

Cultures throughout the ages have generally been unifying forces in human existence. Just as a people speak the same language, so their shared religion and ethos create a unified vision of what is good, true and beautiful. These various expressions of human life should not be confused with goodness, truth and beauty themselves, but they have always shared something in common with them. It is thus the case that all cultures have exhibited art and beauty. There is a harmony in Egyptian civilization, or Japanese civilization, etc., that allow us to see something of an "inner vision" held by a people at a given place and time. Even very isolated

groups, such as early modern humans in Europe, had an art (likely religious in nature) that graced the walls of their caves. These cave paintings do not tell us much about the people who painted them, other than that they saw the world as beautiful and worth imaging. That alone makes us know that we are encountering people like ourselves.

But our modern world (particularly the modern, Western world) has seen a fragmentation of its culture and ethos. Its common religious world was shattered at the time of the Reformation, and has been shattered repeatedly in the centuries since by various ideologies, wars and competing visions. Today, there is no common vision within the modern world. Usefulness (utility), productivity, and marketability tend to drive our decisions. The result is a failure of Beauty in its traditional sense. Things can be usefully beautiful (Apple Computers), or productively beautiful (paper clips), or marketable (Bobble-Head dolls), but they stand alone, distinct and isolated, simply part of the myriad distractions that comprise our culture.

It is more than possible to have a culture that is merely useful, productive or marketable (at our best – this is our present world). However, even those shadows of the beautiful begin to shatter in the hands of fragmented minds. A fragmented mind is not capable of judging usefulness, productivity and marketability. Our concepts of such things are themselves distortions.

Intellectual products are affected by the same forces. Law has historically been among the most sublime efforts of civilizations. From Hammurabi's Law Code to that of Justinian, efforts at justice have created safer and more balanced worlds. But as the fragmentation of culture (and our minds) reaches a certain point, the Law itself becomes an exercise in fragmentation. Simple statements of human rights become tortured wranglings within the courts, excuses for lawsuits rather than protections for human beings. The American Constitution was (and remains) a "beautiful" document, a testament to a moment of common vision relatively rare for its century. The same document could not have been produced a mere two decades later. It certainly could not be written with such elegance today.

I return to the problem of the One God. Modern theologies have begun to "qualify" the One God with the same concerns (and much the same content) that fragments modern law. "God" easily serves as a cipher for the vision of man – a place-holder for man's highest ideals (this is the idolatry engaged in by all cultures and not at all the One God of the Christian faith). However, the "One God," of the modern West fails to have even a single name. He is "He/She," or other such silly epithets. Graduate schools of religion across the nation (in America) regularly require such

abominable language of its students, imposing a new cultural orthodoxy in the name of its fragmented vision.

Within our fragmentation, nothing could be more obvious than the divisions of Christian believers. That the Church is one, is taught as clearly by the Scriptures as the unity of God Himself – and for the same reason. The Body of the One God cannot be two (much less 30,000). The ecclesiological crisis of denominationalism did not become apparent until the early 19th century on the American frontier. That period produced a great anxiety about the unity of the Church and saw the creation of various man-made efforts towards unity (Mormons started a new “one” Church; the Campbellites offered a new New Testament Church – today the “Church of Christ”; others created theories of the “invisible” Church in which a unity existed despite the apparent divisions). This “invisible” unity is so widely accepted today that those ancient Churches who reject the innovation (Orthodox, Roman Catholics, etc.) are considered to lack charity. Ours is not a culture that has any knowledge of “One.” We have corrupted our understanding.

Within Orthodoxy (and in a different manner, Rome) there remains an experience of the “One” preserved at least in the One Cup. By extension, the One Church is that which shares the One Cup. This sacrament of the One, offers a portal for approaching Christ’s teaching and revelation of the One God. But that revelation is deeply removed from the mathematical concept of the number one. It is also why discussions of the Church, particularly of the “One” Church are so problematic for the Orthodox. We say that the Orthodox Church is the “One Church,” and others hear us mathematically. Number has no place in the concept of the One Church, just as it has no place in the One God. That others want to make claims for the “many” as part of the “One,” demonstrates just how great is the problem created by schism and heresy.

I have no “ecumenical” solutions, only the proclamation of the One God made known to us in Jesus Christ. Knowledge of the One God makes possible (and at the same time) knowledge of our true self, and knowledge of the “universe” (a One-verse) in which we see the relatedness of all creation and its place in the revelation of the One God.

To behold creation in such a manner draws forth from the greatest depths of our being, the cry of original agreement, “It is beautiful (good)!”

A note: Conversations between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholics are ultimately about the One Church, and not about "two," or other such concepts. The perception of the One is precisely the problem and thus not solvable by the many silly suggestions of those who do not understand the problem.

Source: glory2godforallthings.com