

The God Who Is No God - 2

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Early Christianity was surely marked by practices: without them, there would have been no need of martyrdoms in the arenas of the Roman Empire. Early Christianity was not a set of beliefs - philosophies were cheap and plentiful in ancient Rome. It was the Christian refusal to offer worship to the Emperor and the gods of the Empire that brought them to the arena. They refused to engage in the practices of the pagan state. The radical generosity of Christians came under the abuse of the Platonist philosopher Celsus. He excoriated Christian acceptance of thieves, rogues, prostitutes, drunkards and the like while the Christian refusal to declare upstanding pagans (such as himself) as “just,” was a rejection of Roman society itself. Christians were dangerous.



The closest thing to danger presented by Christians in the modern world is the insistence by some that the unborn actually have a right to life and should be protected against the actions of those who would destroy them. However, many Christians (including some who claim to be “pro-life”), accept the secular fiction of the separation of Church and state, and offer that their private beliefs should not determine the actions of others. Their private beliefs are useless – before God and man.

The American theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, commonly states that “there is no such thing as private morality.” It is inherently the case that morality is a matter of behavior between people. A “private morality” is no morality at all. To believe that the unborn have a right to life but to refuse to insist that such a right be observed by all, is, in fact, to declare that there is no such right. If there is a “right,” then it is immoral not to demand that everyone accept such a right.

Whatever we profess as Christians can be acted upon and practiced – or it is a useless profession. Christ’s parable of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25 confronts Christians with their practices: feeding the hungry; visiting the prisoners; clothing the naked; giving drink to the thirsty. No mention is made of Creed. It is not that belief is unimportant – but the dogma of the faith undergirds and informs our practice of the faith. “Faith without works is dead,” because it is no faith at all.

The heart of the Orthodox faith (both dogma and practice) is found in its proclamation of union with Christ. “God became man so that man could become

god,” in the words of St. Athanasius. Human life was intended to be lived in union with God. In the Genesis story of the fall we learn the essential character of our brokenness: we severed our communion with God and turned towards the path of death and destruction. The nature of sin lies precisely in its movement away from union with God. The path of salvation is precisely the path of union with God. This is made possible by Christ’s union with humanity. He took our broken condition upon Himself – trampling down death by death in His crucifixion and descent into Hades – He raises us up in His resurrection to the path for which we were created. From glory to glory we are changed into His image as we live in union with Him.

This is more than a doctrinal story – it is also a description of the practice of the Christian faith. We love because we live in union with Christ, “who loved us and gave Himself for us.” We feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner because in doing so we do this to Christ. Every practice of kindness and mercy is an act of union with Christ. The Church’s life of feasts and fasts, sacraments and services are the practice of worship – the life of union with Christ. They are not religious entertainment nor mere educational events: they are the visible manifestation of the inner life of God in man.

Christians in this world are “as the soul is to the body,” in the words of a second-century Christian writer (*Epistle to Diognetus*). As such, they are the life of this world. The presence of practicing Christians is properly the presence of the Kingdom of God. The in-breaking of the Kingdom in this world is a disruption of the culture of death initiated in the fall. The world’s love affair with death is and should be threatened by the manifestation of the Kingdom. This is only true as Christianity is practiced. That Christians “believe” something is no threat whatsoever unless that belief is made manifest in practice.

The proposed constitution of the European Union (to give an example) offers religious freedom to individuals. Orthodox Christians have complained that such “freedom” was guaranteed under Communism – but that in the name of protecting individuals, parents were forbidden to teach the faith to their children. The Christian faith is practiced as a community. An agreement to define the faith as an individual matter is an agreement to destroy Orthodoxy. The world’s onslaught of Christian practice is subtle and relentless. Christians would do well to *practice* their faith and refuse devil’s bargain offered by modern states.

We are called to a life in union with the true and living God. That life infuses every action of the day – every breath we take. Anything less is an agreement with the enemy to place our God at arms length and to serve a god who is no God.

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