



Readings II in Faith & Science

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Praise

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Praise

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I do not usually spend much time thinking about the quality of our praise of God. I don't suppose that a lot of us do. Recently, however, several things have come together which have led me to wonder why, with all the sophistication we have acquired (or think we've acquired), our praise in word and song is no better than the Psalmist's. The Psalms, written as long as three millennia ago, surpass our poetic sense of the marvels we have received from God's hand. I have been wondering about that now for some time.

One possible reason for this is that we no longer find awe in the heavens. Perhaps we think that, because we can predict some heavenly phenomena with great precision - things like the appearance of comets and eclipses or the crash of a comet into Jupiter - there is no mystery left in the heavens. Perhaps we are imbued with the notion that, if we can hang a name on something, it is somehow under our control. Yet to give the name pulsar, or quasar, or black hole or brown dwarf or whatever, to something out there does not give us any control at all. The Psalmist could look to the heavens and see the handiwork of God. What do we and our culture see there?

Today, we can see far beyond the ability of the Psalmist. With the invention of the telescope in all its forms we have expanded our sensorium beyond anything that could have been imagined even three hundred years ago, much less three thousand years ago. But even with our expanded sight and our discovery of galaxies, neutron stars, binary stars and things we can't name or understand, we have not poured out such praise of their Maker as did the Psalmist. Our physical vision has expanded by many orders of magnitude, but our praise has not. This is only one area where science has provided us with an awareness of both the delicacy, complexity and awesomeness of physical systems.

As the Psalmist could look out and see the macroworld, we can now, with our array of various kinds of microscopes, behold a micro-world just as beautiful as the heavens. It is as complex a world with a delicacy of structure that we do not observe in the heavens. Yet, even with this much greater ability to see the handiwork of God that was hidden to the Psalmist, we have not surpassed the ancients in our praise of the Creator.

We now know, for instance, that all living systems are unified at the level of the amino acids. Still, our praise of the Creator has grown neither in its quantity nor quality. We are well aware now - another gift of the life scientists - that women as well as men contribute to the genetic makeup of their children. Yet, even after some hundreds of years, not all of our theology nor our liturgy has sufficiently incorporated that now rather basic notion.

In a certain sense, we can call the historical influence that science has had on our self-understanding, and on our understanding of the immense cosmos about us, a kind of demythologizing. We have become, and continue to become, aware of both our limits and our inter-connectedness with the rest of creation. We have learned from Copernicus, Galileo and Newton that the heavens and the earth follow the same physical laws, that there is a physical unity throughout the universe. We have learned from Darwin that there is a unity of all living systems at the level of the species. The work with recombinant DNA has deepened our understanding of the unity of all living systems at the level of the amino acids, the basic building blocks of those systems according to our present understanding. Why doesn't this new awareness inspire our praise of God?

Can it be that Christianity itself has downplayed the poetic quality of our praise? Is it more difficult to be in awe of a God who is immanent in the cosmos and immanent in us - in Our Lord Jesus? Is it easier to praise a purely transcendent God who thunders on us exclusively from on high, who continually erupts in a completely unpredictable way into our history? The theory has a certain plausibility about it, doesn't it? What's the old saying about familiarity breeding contempt? God is so much easier to domesticate to our desires and horizons now that he has pitched his tent among us. I believe that we all do this and maybe none more than the highly educated and putatively sophisticated.

Both St. Paul and St. John teach us that creation is in Christ. The hymn Paul quotes in Colossians is clear evidence of creation in Christ. The Council of Chalcedon defined that Christ the Son of God is one and the same as Christ the son of Mary of Nazareth. Creation in Jesus Christ is creation in the incarnate God. Our wonder should be greater, not less. Part of the Christian problem may well be the notion that long ago came into theological currency that there was a "pure" nature that subsequently fell and needed redemption.

In such a theological understanding, creation is of less interest than redemption and we fall into the trap of some kind of "spiritual" Christianity that sees little value in the creation, in the material reality all about us. This, I would expect, would dampen our praise for God's handiwork as evident in all the beauty that surrounds us, from the unimaginably big to the imperceptibly small. One of the European cardinals asked the German theologian, Karl Rahner, not long after Vatican Council II, why devotion to Mary had declined. Rahner replied that many theologians had made Christ into an abstraction and abstractions had no need of mothers. In our own hearts we must catch the "adventure of specifics" that Christianity really is if we hope to have it on our lips and in our song.

While the scientific understanding of the past few centuries has diminished our stature as being at the physical center of the universe and being a species totally set apart from the other species, still it has enhanced our dignity as the people and the world to which Christ came and as the species into which he became incarnate. We know from revelation that our world is the center of the created universe in the order of salvation and the order of the final Kingdom of God. We know also that the human species is the one which God chose to enter physically. We know that in Christ we can master our drives and finally become integral and integrated persons - Freud notwithstanding.

Science has displaced our ideas that we are at the physical center of things; revelation has disclosed that in the new creation in Christ we are at the center of God's will for creation. Unfortunately, little of this information has penetrated into the consciousness or work of the ecclesial/theological community, especially, it seems, of those who specialize in creating or maintaining our liturgical praise of God.

This is not to place excessive blame on the magisterium or the theologians or even the liturgists. A share of the culpability can be laid upon the occupant of many a chair of humanities studies as well. This, of course, does not disqualify them from membership in the human race. If it did, the planet would practically be uninhabited. It does, however, harm the Church and limit the praise due to God. It stifles both the poetic and theological imagination of the Church. In short, it inhibits any real growth in our appreciation of the creation God has given us. Scientists are also to blame for the lack of praise we give. Indeed, there's plenty of blame to go around.

It is quite possible the whole course of the intellectual history of the world plays a part in our lack of wonder and our voiceless praise. I may be way off base in what follows; it's really little more than a reflection out loud. It does seem to me, however, that as we grow deeper in our learning and in our science and in our understanding we tend to become more general and our thinking and expression becomes more abstract. The more sophisticated we become, the more abstruse we seem. It is possible that that may be the normal course for humans in a fallen world (I don't pretend to know whether such a way of thinking is a relic of original sin). But I think the observation is accurate. We tend to get more abstract in our thinking as we learn more and think we understand more. We also tend to look down on our predecessors who were far more specific in their dealings with each other and with God. I know people (maybe I'm one myself) who believe that something must be brilliant since they don't understand it.

Love, however, seems quite the opposite. The more deeply we love something, the more our attention is focused on specifics. We are more concerned with the shape of the nose, for example, the color of the hair than with some generalized form. St. Paul assures us that it's love, not knowledge, that makes the building grow. We say in our culture that love makes the world go around.

From all we know from Revelation, God is a God of specificities, not generalities. He doesn't need universal concepts to understand himself, us or all the mysterious creatures of the universe. Every year I more fully realize that it's always dangerous to say what God can or cannot do. But as far as we can tell, God doesn't work or know or love in general.

We have to reclaim our religious understanding from generality and from abstraction. Our creator is specific. Our savior is specific. Our King is specific. The Church is historical, therefore, specific. We are specific. Each of us is unique, without real human copies. This must be the wellspring of our love. And it is out of this love that our praise will mount to the heavens. Praise cannot be the property of only the untutored and unlettered. The educated, the sophisticated, the cultured must praise God as well.

Why doesn't the Church attract the poet, the musician, the painter as it once did? This, I realize, is a tangled question since it deals with human motivation which is as tangled as anything in the universe. But if we love, we praise. It's as simple as that. And if we can bring to our love the vast repertory of our knowledge (accompanied by a realization of the greatness of our ignorance) we can praise God for those extraordinary and mysterious gifts he has scattered for us throughout the universe. Cannot we come to love and praise as greatly as the Psalmist did three thousand years ago?

Christ welcomed the little children and said: "Let the children come to me. Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven." Children are often extravagant in their praise of something that catches their imagination and fills their heart. So should we sober adults and scientists be, at least at times. What better place is there than Christian prayers for the "child-like" the whimsical, the artistic and the beautiful?

Questions

Have we, as late 20th century sophisticates lost our sense of "awe" in the creation? How can we regain that sense of childlike wonder? Should we? Or is that all there is? Science has demonstrated that the human is not at the physical center of things, but revelation places us at the center of God's will for creation. How do we effect that "centering" in our lives without "harming" the rest of creation?

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