

Theme 3: The Beginning and the End: Theological Insights

Presentation: Wisdom, Knowledge and Information

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Where is the wisdom that we have lost in knowledge?

Where is the knowledge that we have lost in information?

T.S.Eliot – Chorus I from *The Rock*.

Margaret Barker in her exploration of *Paradise Lost*, meditated on the two trees in the Paradise Garden – the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge. The fruit of the Tree of Life was true knowledge about the divine creation. This is what the Biblical tradition regards as wisdom. “Wisdom is a Tree of Life to those that lay hold upon her.” Proverbs III,18.

What of the Tree of Knowledge? This is knowledge wrenched from its source which, as Margaret reminded us, according to the first Book of Enoch “caused much bloodshed upon the earth.” The knowledge which comes from the second tree is partial. It is knowledge only of a god-forsaken world in which human beings have themselves assumed the role of gods. In the process of course they have discovered that abstracted from the Creator and Source of Life, they are doomed to die.

The knowledge in Wisdom, springing from awareness of the Creator which is the beginning of wisdom has the power to penetrate our lives and effect a transformation of mind. This transforming power is symbolised in the Bible by anointing. Christ is the anointed one [Christos in Greek means anointed] who possesses the fullness of the Wisdom of God and who is in the world to open up the way to Paradise Regained. The liturgy, which we shall celebrate tomorrow in Ravenna, is an action in which the Holy Spirit enrolls us in Christ’s work of Regaining Paradise. Paradise will be evoked by the clouds of incense, taken from those trees which Adam and Eve smuggled out when they were exiled from Eden.

Doubtless the innocent eye can still find this account of the relation of wisdom to knowledge, the tragedy of which is expressed in Eliot’s poem, at once convincing and a call to profound change. For most of us however the primal vision is clouded and we must approach the problem of the wisdom that we have lost in knowledge from a different angle and “by indirections find directions out.”

Max Weber in an analysis of modernity that is still valuable, talks of its essence being the “differentiation of the cultural value spheres.” Amongst the various spheres that Weber describes, he refers to the separation of art, morals and science. Most pre-modern cultures did not differentiate these spheres clearly but modernity at least from the 17th century in the West, differentiate art, morals and science and let each pursue its own truths according to its own methods, free from intrusion from any other sphere. This was followed by a spectacular growth in scientific knowledge, a flurry of new approaches to art, and a sustained look at morals in a more naturalistic light.

Now, however, the distress arising from pursuing these ways to knowledge in isolation from other spheres is becoming more evident. We are nowhere near even the beginning of a new summa but in so many fields of thought this seems to be the time for expeditions into neighbouring spheres in an effort to find some unitive and integrative concepts.

There is a peculiar difficulty in the cultures of W.Europe where the differentiation occurred in the context of a radical questioning or even rejection of the divine reference. In the European civil wars of the 17th century, the churches were actually implicated in the devastation of the Continent. It always behoves those who speak about divine wisdom as it has been understood in the Christian tradition to speak with a humility informed by this failure.

The result is however that Western Europeans and through then much of the rest of the world experienced differentiation with an atheist tendency. Now however, as many speakers have asserted we need a community of insight as we face the ecological challenge and the spiritual dimension is crucial. Our generation relates to the cosmos in a way which is frankly autistic. There seems to be a lack of awareness or recognition which causes us to waste the beauty of the world.

The crisis we face is not in essence an ecological crisis but a crisis of awareness. We are not dealing with any inevitable conflict between science as such and religion but rather a way of being the world which is out of sympathy and communion with the creation. This lack of sympathy is manifested in symptoms of ecological distress.

The modern project of growth without limits and with no end in view beyond the process itself arises in the perspective of the Abrahamic religions from choosing the wrong tree. We have lost the knowledge and awareness of wisdom in the pursuit of fragmented knowledge.

The pursuit of fragmented knowledge divorced from any consciousness of ourselves as creatures fashions a knower who looks out on the world about him and sees not an animate nature in which he is a participant but simply matter to be exploited. Choosing the wrong tree progressively degrades a human being into someone who gets used to the dull pain of seeing nature as a lifeless desert and of treating its beauty as a deceptive mask. Dominance is substituted for connectedness in this way of knowing the universe. It is a way of knowledge which leads as Descartes observed to a way of being in the world in which man falls into hubris and regards himself as “maitre et possesseur de la terre.”

Now however things are even more serious. The habit of regarding everything as an object has even infected our good opinion of ourselves. Beneath much of the rhetoric about human dignity lurks a reductionist suspicion that we are little more than upright animals or even just rapacious bipeds whose happiness lies in consuming the world and treating other people as commodities to be used for our pleasure.

We have heard about the incense which is the perfume of Paradise, smoke is of course what we associate with hell. In 1892 however a business man quoted by Professor McNeill in his excellent book *Something New under the Sun* celebrated “smoke as the incense burning on the altars of industry. It is beautiful to me. It shows that men are changing the merely potential forces of nature into articles of comfort for humanity.”

Even in the context of such skewed vision we can still recognise the survival of a certain quality in some human beings which we call wisdom. This quality does not depend on any conscious relationship with God. There are people who live their lives in a balanced and peaceable spirit, accepting what seems to be reality with a seasoning of prudence derived from wide experience.

This is not however the wisdom which comes from the Tree of Life. This wisdom together with some reflection on how one might enter into the knowledge which comes with wisdom, a knowledge which does not merely describe and leave things as they were before but which

transforms human life and the world of which we are a part – that is my theme and a central theme of this symposium.

I am discussing nothing less than participation in the wisdom of God symbolised by the Tree of Life which is planted in Genesis and bears leaves for the healing of the nations in the Book of Revelation. I do not mean to excommunicate other ways of approaching divine wisdom but hope you will forgive me if I focus on the Christian way.

The wisdom which comes from above is marked by creaturely awareness of the Creator and a consequent respect for the balance and limits proposed by the deep moral structure of created life. Dwelling in this wisdom leads to a fresh and reverent way of being in the world.

This wisdom is present in all of us as potential and indeed it is a gift held out to us but a profound appropriation of this wisdom is not a given it is task.

For those seeking a way to Paradise Regained, work is required not merely conceptualisation. Work, public work is what the word liturgy means. The liturgies of the ancient world were public works in which citizens were assembled to build a road or a temple. Liturgy is the consummation of philosophy, as the title of a recent very significant book suggests.

The living wisdom with which we are concerned has its origin in the silence of God the Father, is expressed in the Son and communicated by the Spirit.

All liturgical work begins by leaving home and setting out. If we contemplate our present ecological distresses we must long for transformation. The partial god-forsaken knowledge which comes from the Tree of Knowledge can be a rejection of otherness and openness by taking refuge in the circle I form with myself. By contrast I experience science very often as avital part of the detour to wisdom since science can open up the world by decentering the self and distancing ourselves from ourselves in the search for a more genuine holism. The observer can never of course be excluded from the equation but the self can be decentered. Wisdom finds itself by losing itself.

Liturgical work proceeds as we lay hold on life symbolised by the bread and the wine, with thanksgiving. In this act we protest against the various forms of reductionism which express themselves in taking life for granted as nothing but the obvious. In doing this we cry out to the precomprehensible, open to the mystery of which we are a part.

All closed systems, ideologies which purport to describe absolute totality [we think of the materialist ideologies which until recently held sway in the countries through which we have been travelling] suffer from the defect that it is impossible to postulate such a system without to some extent surreptitiously putting myself in place of the whole. Wisdom is open to the mystery which is not a puzzle which is accessible to the little grey cells but the totality of which we form a part so that we cannot achieve a standpoint to view it as an object, get behind or fathom it. The appropriate approach to mystery is a cry, Lord open thou our lips.

Cry out and take life with thanksgiving that constitutes the primary affirmation I our search for living wisdom. One of the major themes of the philosophy that developed in the modern era has been how do we know anything at all. The search for living wisdom and I observe science in practice proceeds in the words of Paul Ricoeur “as a second order elucidation of a nebula of meaning that has a pre-philosophical character.”

With the cry and the thanksgiving comes liberation from the hermetically sealed bubble of the self which many non philosophical moderns experience as a prison house. There is further transformation in store. Descartes' way of knowing makes of man as he said a "master and possessor of the earth," with all the problems of a relationship of dominance and exploitation which follow both for our relations with the earth and with one another. Liturgical work flows on from its primary affirmation and an opening of life to its mysterious source, which is always a horizon never an object. Then the work continues as following the way of Jesus Christ, the expression of the Wisdom of God, we offer up and hand over our life and our things to the Source of All Life and Wisdom. By this action of handing over, the master of the feast becomes the guest of divine wisdom. As we hand over and offer up our things, our possessions, the way is opened for them to be received back as gifts. The master becomes a guest. The possession becomes a gift. Divine wisdom transforms the self and the world it inhabits.

Some of the concepts of modern science actually seem to me to enhance the plausibility of this work of entry into the divine wisdom. There are a number of concepts which make the recovery of an authentically Biblical and spiritual awareness of living wisdom more of a possibility.

The man centred and reason dominated world view of the enlightenment, to which scholastic theology contributed not a little, has been challenged by Darwinism which, whatever its other reductionist tendencies, has returned human beings to their organic place in nature. This has restored the perspective which informs the symbolism of Genesis II in which God forms Adam, the earth creature out of the very dust – ha'adam. I can think of other examples as well as more problematical areas and I shall listen to what Rupert Sheldrake has to say with great interest.

The experimental liturgical life has been refreshed in the course of the 20th century. The beauty of the liturgical life is the signature of divine wisdom and it is alluring. Many in our own time are drawn to the liturgical life but it is still hard sometimes to discern real action, movement and desire for transformation in liturgies which can appear to resemble either cultural fossils or deadly audio visual aids to acquiring knowledge of Christian doctrine. The poet Auden sadly reflected that the early Christians saw their agape decline into a late lunch with Constantine. This is indeed one of our great challenges as much religion has been reduced to knowledge with scribes picking over the rags and bones of dead men's thought.

The need for a further revival of liturgical work as a way of responding to the crisis of awareness which lies at the heart of the ecological crisis is very pressing. Liturgical work has the potential to create a powerful and salvific ethos from which ethics can be energised. We are confronting the puzzle that we know a lot but we seem especially those in richer countries, unable to effect the transformation of hearts and minds with the self restraint and the sacrifice which will be the theme of the addressed by the Patriarch at the conclusion of this Symposium. There is a great cry in the Orthodox Liturgy when the gospel is about to be read, Wisdom, let us attend! It is good counsel.

This is a time of great confusion. In many parts of the West there is a deconstructionist establishment where it counts in education and the media. The accent is upon the impossibility of universally valid truth – always of course ironically with the exception of that particular truth.

As a reaction to this confusion, there has been a retreat to the literal in religion and in some parts of the religious world as re-affirmation of exclusive boundaries. "Ecumenical" has become a term of abuse in some quarters. There is at the same time also a new credulity and a disparagement of the rational. The Economist carried a story about a tabloid newspaper which had a very popular astrology column. When the resident seer failed to show up one morning a rather cynical hack was pressed into service. He to relieve the boredom put under the sign of

cancer this message, “all the ills of yesteryear will be as nothing to what will befall you today.” The switchboard was jammed with panicking readers and the hapless hack had to be sacked.

Science and religion should be allies in the search for Holy Wisdom which is at once respectful of the divine gift of reason but chooses the Tree of Living Wisdom not the Tree of Fragmented Knowledge. We need to educate a generation of everyday, matter of fact mystics, contemplatives who recognise that divine wisdom in the person of Jesus Christ did not drop out of this world into some other world but who dropped in and dwelt among us.