

Christianity in a One-Storey Universe

Preliminary - Death in a Two-Storey Universe

I have written before about the two-storey universe that is part of our cultural inheritance in the modern world. I have noted that the default position of our culture is secular protestantism. I have explained that I mean not that we do not believe in God, but that in our dominant cultural metaphor the God we believe in is removed from our everyday affairs. Often what we are left with is a collection of doctrines to which, for one reason or another, we have given allegiance. But there remains the two-storey universe.

Now the primary difficulty of the two storey universe is that we live on the first floor while (our metaphor would have it) God lives on the second floor. The great unspoken fear for all on the first floor is that no one actually lives on the second floor. Every time a board creaks we quickly rush to proclaim, "Miracle," mostly because it finally gives us some evidence that God is moving around up there.

Rumor has it that when some one of us dies, their soul gets to move to the second-storey. If, however, they were bad, or failed to have correct theology, or a number of other factors, they have to go to the basement (this actually gives us three storeys). Our culture is certain that no one goes from the basement to the second floor (this of course is guaranteed by the reading of Luke 16:26 which speaks of a "great gulf that is fixed" between the sufferings of gehenna and the joys of Paradise).

There are those who spend a great deal of time, and money, trying to prove that there really are souls of the departed on the second floor. They make the mistake of becoming Spiritualists, and are all about "proving" there is life after death.

The full effect of all of this metaphysical architecture is that we live in ignorance. We want to believe that someone is on the second floor, but we're not sure. Thus there can be a dogged fundamentalism with regard to certain passages of Scripture and the way they are interpreted, because it is seen as the only guarantee that we're right about the second storey. But try as we might - it is an inherent part of life in a two-storey universe that you can never be sure and that doubt always dogs your every thought.

Thus death becomes a crisis of faith. The industry surrounding death is a large part of our culture as well. Today, we often "celebrate life" rather than speak of the second story. We simply remember how good the first floor is and say goodbye to those whom we will miss.

In its proclamation of the Gospel, the Orthodox Church predates the two-storey universe. This is a distinct advantage. We do not hear hymns that are full of modern doubt, nor our own lack of confidence echoing back at us. Indeed, Orthodoxy proclaims that when we gather for worship, there are no two-storeys - that Heaven and Earth are together - that we actually eat of the marriage feast - indeed its food is nothing other than the Body and Blood of God. To the question: "Do you believe in God?" We may answer: "Believe in Him? We eat His Body and drink His blood!" I mean nothing blasphemous in the statement - but simply state the facts.

It is this presence-of-Heaven-here-and-now that is Orthodoxy's primary assault against the mistaken notions of the two-storey universe. For that proclamation is indeed the truth. Our cultural metaphor is like the lie of the White Witch who imprisoned the children beneath the mountain and told them there was no Narnia. We pray in the beginning of almost all our prayers, "O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, who art everywhere present and fillest all things..." Learning to pray in such a manner and to gradually come out of the darkness of the lie and into the brightness of the truth is also leaving the two-storey universe and coming to live where there is but one storey.

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William Dalrymple in his wonderful book, *From the Holy Mountain*, relates a wonderful one-storey account of the monks (Coptic Orthodox) of the Monastery of St. Antony in the Desert of Egypt. Only the smallest hint of a two-storeyed world has reached them and find the notion unbelievable:

The monks of St. Anthony's remain wonderfully Dark Age in their outlook and conversation. Exorcisms, miraculous healings and ghostly apparitions of long-dead saints are to the monks what doorstep milk deliveries are to suburban Londoners - unremarkable everyday occurrences that would never warrant a passing mention if foreigners did not always seem to be so inexplicably amazed by them:

"See up there?" said Abuna Dioscorus, as I was finishing my egg. He pointed to the space between the two towers of the abbey church. "In June 1987 in the middle of the night our father St. Antony appeared there hovering on a cloud of shining light."

"You saw this?" I asked.

"No," said Fr. Dioscorus. "I'm short-sighted."

He took off his spectacles to show me the thickness of the glass.

"I can barely see the abbot when I sit beside him at supper," he said. "But many other fathers saw the apparition. On one side of St. Antony stood St. Mark the Hermit and on the other was Abuna Yustus."

"Abuna Yustus?"

"He is one of our fathers. He used to be the sacristan."

"So what was he doing up there?"

"He had just departed this life."

"Oh," I said. "I see."

"Officially he's not a saint yet, but I'm sure he will be soon. His canonization is up for discussion at the next Coptic synod. His relics have been the cause of many miracles: blind children have been made to see, the lame have got up from their wheelchairs..."

"All the usual sort of stuff."

"Exactly. But you won't believe this-"

Here Fr. Dioscorus lowered his voice into a whisper.

"You won't believe this but we had some visitors from Europe two years ago - Christians, some sort of Protestants - who said they didn't believe in the power of relics!"

The monk stroked his beard, wide-eyed with disbelief.

"No," he continued. "I'm not joking. I had to take the Protestants aside and explain that we believe that St. Antony and all the fathers have not died, that they live with us, continually protecting us and looking after us. When they are needed - when we go to their graves and pray to their relics - they appear and sort out our problems."

"Can the monks see them?"

"Who? Protestants?"

"No. These deceased fathers."

"Abuna Yustus is always appearing," said Fr. Dioscorus matter-of-factly. "In fact one of the fathers had a half-hour conversation with him the day before yesterday. And of course St. Antony makes fairly regular appearances - although he is very busy these days answering prayers all over the world. But even when we cannot see the departed fathers we can always feel them. And besides - there are many other indications that they are with us."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "What sort of indications?"

“Well, take last week for instance. The Bedouin from the desert are always bringing their sick to us for healing. Normally it is something quite simple: we let them kiss a relic, give them an aspirin and send them on their way. But last week they brought in a small girl who was possessed by a devil. We took the girl into the church, and as it was the time for vespers one of the fathers went off to ring the bell for prayers. When he saw this the devil inside the girl began to cry: ‘Don’t ring the bell! Please don’t ring the bell!’ We asked him why not. ‘Because,’ replied the devil, ‘when you ring the bell it’s not just the living monks who come into the church: all the holy souls of the fathers join with you too, as well as great multitudes of angels and archangels. How can I remain in the church when that happens? I’m not staying in a place like that.’ At that moment the bell began to ring, the girl shrieked and the devil left her!”

Fr. Dioscorus clicked his fingers: “Just like that. So you see,” he said. “That proves it.”

Indeed, it does prove it, and those of us who do spiritual battle in a two, even three-storey universe can only marvel and say, “Pray for us!” How sad for us that we perceive ourselves to be in such a small universe, longing for more, hoping for more, arguing for more, starving for more. God give us grace and have mercy on such blindness as is ours! Come and drive away the dark demons and their lies!

Part One - What Do Words Mean in a One-Storey Universe?

It seems to me that much of our religious vocabulary, defined many times within the past 500 years, is enculturated to speak a two-storey world (see the previous post for an explanation of two-storey world). Words such as “faith,” “believe,” and their relatives belong somehow to a portion of the world that is not first-storey. They are keys to the second storey, and are therefore unconvincing to the ultimate modern one-storey folk, the atheists. The abstracted notions of “imputed righteousness,” when the meaning is something other than an actual reality within the person of whom we are speaking (imputed, as in “in the mind of God”) are tailor-made for a two-storey world. It is little wonder that much religious discourse takes place in the abstracted world of the second-storey. Much doctrinal discussion is little more than moving around air (or digital events) and not about anything that someone is actually doing.

There are plenty of hucksters on the first floor, who make false claims and boast of false gifts. Televangelists playing “baseball” with the Holy Spirit, as if God were a ball of energy to be hurled across the stage at so many bowling-pin believers. This is silliness, driven by our desperation for the marriage of the first and second storey. Such hunger will always produce false prophets. Simon Magus was only the first in a long line.

But, I believe it is equally tragic when those who claim to be teachers of the Kingdom of God, are in fact only sophists, able to manipulate words and symbols in discussions about what the floor plan or the stairs to the second storey must be like, but without anything other than theory to guide. Where is the honest teacher who says, “I don’t know?”

So for the moment I will leave a question (I do plan to return and suggest some answers): what should religious language look like if it is not the language of a two-storey universe? What do words mean in a one storey universe?

Part Two - The Meaning of Words

I have taken this discussion of life in a “one-storey” universe to that of language, precisely because I think that much of our language (as we presently define it) presumes “two-storey” meanings. One of the places I will press language is our speaking of God’s Providence.

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In the “Morning Prayer of the Last Elders of Optina,” we have a version of a prayer that can be found in similar form by other names within Orthodoxy, but certainly a prayer that expresses a very common thought:

O Lord, grant that I may meet all that this coming day brings to me with spiritual tranquility. Grant that I may fully surrender myself to Thy holy Will. At every hour of this day, direct and support me in all things. Whatsoever news may reach me in the course of the day, teach me to accept it with a calm soul and the firm conviction that all is subject to Thy holy Will. Direct my thoughts and feelings in all my words and actions. In all unexpected occurrences, do not let me forget that all is sent down from Thee. Grant that I may deal straightforwardly and wisely with every member of my family, neither embarrassing nor saddening anyone. O Lord, grant me the strength to endure the fatigue of the coming day and all the events that take place during it. Direct my will and teach me to pray, to believe, to hope, to be patient, to forgive, and to love. Amen.

Though the prayer states that “all is sent down from Thee” I would not necessarily describe this as “two-storey” language, though it could easily be taken that way. More to my point is the assumption of the prayer that God is indeed, “everywhere present and filling all things.” Equally that, “in Him we live and move and have our being.” There has been something of an abandonment of the concept of providence in many theological corners in modern times - probably brought on from the crisis within theodicy (the technical word for the understanding of the relationship between God and evil - or the question, “How is God just?”) Events of the 20th century, particularly the horrors of modern war and the like, have tended to push the question of God’s providential involvement with the everyday world to the outer realm of theological discourse. When I attended a modern Protestant seminary back in the 70’s, not once was the subject of Providence even discussed. It simply had no place at the table.

Of course, if we are to speak in a one-storey manner, Providence, God’s involvement with everything that is, cannot be avoided. Interestingly, it is not only not avoided by contemporary Orthodox spiritual teaching, it remains very much in the fore. The late Russian elder, Fr. Ioan Krestiankin, speaks constantly of God’s providence in his recently published letters. This language, interestingly, comes from one who spent part of his Christian life in the Soviet Gulag. Such mindless suffering seems to have had no effect on his perception of God’s providence.

However, many are appropriately nervous when they read accounts such as those of the monks at St. Antony’s monastery in Egypt (in my first posting on this topic). The hucksterism and spiritual delusion that are rampant in some Christian circles can easily and appropriately make people shy - who wants to live in delusion?

Thus, I think that as Christians we approach the abandonment of a two-storey universe slowly. Above everything we begin to move our Christian life out of the realm of abstraction and into the realm of living. We pray rather than think about prayer. We trust God rather than discussing the concept of trusting God. We act on the basis of faith rather than spending time talking about the importance of faith. We make every effort to embrace God as good and at work in all things.

I suppose this is a return to my writing about the small things - the immediate things. But this is where we live - and it is where we are being saved. So much of the Orthodox faith has this very concrete character about it. I have come to some fairly simple practices in my life as a

priest. When someone calls me at Church to ask for prayer - particularly for matters of great moment - I leave the office - go in the Church - and offer a Molieben (it's a short service of prayer, designed particularly for just such occasions). It takes about 20 minutes - but it's what I was asked to do - to pray.

By the same token we bring our faith into this blessed first storey (indeed probably the only storey of the universe) by doing here what we were commanded to do - pray, give, forgive, love, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, etc. It is in such straightforward activities rather than in the abstractions that would call us away that we will find Christ, the saints, the angels and the whole of our faith.

God is with us.

Part Three - The Meaning of Language

Having pointed out that much of popular Christian language (and some images in sacred texts) lend themselves to the notion of a "two-storey" universe - and having noted that the second storey as the dwelling place of all things spiritual has almost insurmountable problems - how should we speak about such things?

First, it seems that it's worth thinking about what the words we use really mean in the first place. Perhaps the most common and universally used prayer in the Christian faith is the one taught us by Christ Himself. The prayer begins, "Our Father who art in heaven..." or does it? The text in the Greek varies. In some cases it reads "in the heavens" (plural) in others simply, "in heaven." Of course Christian theology teaches us that though we may use spatial language to speak of God, we cannot say that there is some space "up there" where God dwells. God is not a creature such that He needs a place to dwell. In that sense, the word "heaven" becomes something of a grammatical place holder, a word that allows us to speak of "where" God is - all of which is fine - unless we become literal about it and make God subject to limitations that are simply incorrect. In that sense "heaven" is as "unspatial" as God is Himself.

If you read classical theological texts such as those of St. Dionysius the Areopagite, it is quite clear that the Church has always understood that God is utterly transcendent. He is "beyond being," in the language of St. Dionysius. The Fathers would say, in speaking of God's Being, that in comparison to our "being," God is not - meaning that though we speak of ourselves as having "being," the "Being" that God has is wholly other and is not to be thought of as having an existence that is like our existence.

In the same vein, the Fathers teach us that God is completely beyond our knowing. Or as Father Thomas Hopko says, "It is impossible to know God - but you have to know Him to know that." This, of course, plays on the understanding that the God who is beyond knowledge, who could not have been known by us, willingly made Himself known, particularly in the person of Jesus Christ, God Incarnate. Thus Christ will say that "no one knows the Father except the Son" (Matt. 11:27).

Christ's promise to us is that "he who eats my [Christ's] flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him" (John 6:56). It doesn't say that if you do this you will have visions of a second storey heaven or such things. The language is very "first storey." Eat, drink, abide. The words are very here and now, though they change the nature of here and now. We are suddenly indwelt by Someone Whom even the universe cannot contain. That reality changes us.

This morning I was thinking on these things as I celebrated the Divine Liturgy. It is quite clear in the Liturgy that the "here and now" has something completely different about it because of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. For instance the Liturgy says:

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Remembering this saving commandment [”Do this in remembrance of me, etc.”] and all those things which have come to pass for us: the Cross, the Tomb, the Resurrection on the third day, the Ascension into heaven, the Sitting at the right hand, and the second and glorious Coming.

It is fairly commonplace in Orthodoxy to note that Chrysostom’s Liturgy speaks of the Second Coming in the past tense. Not because we believe that Christ came for a second time at sometime in the past, but that because of what is happening in the Liturgy, we may speak of the Second Coming in the past tense. We are standing at the Messianic Banquet. If it is Christ who dwells in us and we in Him, then how is it possible that we are not with Him at the beginning and the end (since He Himself is the Beginning and the End)?

The coming of Christ into our world, or rather the manifestation of God to us in this world, has radically changed this world. Part of the proclamation of the Orthodox faith is the true nature of life in this world:

God is with us! Understand Ye nations and submit yourselves for God is with us!

... we sing in the service of Compline. If God is with us, then what must this world truly be? The patriarch Jacob once fell asleep and had a dream. In the dream he saw a ladder stretching “from the earth into heaven.” He saw angels ascending and descending on the ladder. When he awoke he made a very strange statement (at least from the perspective of our post-Freudian world):

Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the LORD is in this place; and I did not know it.” And he was afraid, and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven” (Genesis 28:16-17).

Of course, Jacob made a very first-storey response: he set up a stone, poured oil on it [consecrating it] and promised to serve God and to give Him the tenth of all he had.

It is incorrect to think of the world of our faith in two-storey form. The Incarnation, at the very least, reveals that to be not the case. God is with us and has come to abide in us. That truly makes this storey the first.

Part Four - Speaking of Christianity

Some years back, the Evangelical-convert-to-Rome, Thomas Howard, wrote a book, *Splendor in the Ordinary*. In it he argued for a sacramental world view and spoke of how that might effect the local home. I recall the book because it came out while I was in seminary and caused a minor stir. Some of us were interested in a more sacramental life - but we as yet had no idea either of the scope of the problem nor of the seriousness of the cure.

The creation of “ordinariness,” is itself a bit of a problem. According to the Oxford English Dictionary - the word comes into its present meaning in the 16th and 17th centuries, having had much more technical legal and ecclesiastical meanings prior to that.

(Please forgive the aside...in Anglican usage, a seminary frequently is an island unto itself, not subject to a particular Bishop - as such it is known as a Peculiar. The Dean, who heads the seminary is thus in charge of its order, as a bishop is of a diocese and is thus its Ordinary. When I was in seminary we relished the fact that our Dean was, technically, the Ordinary of the

Peculiar. There was much debate as to whether he was more ordinary or peculiar but this was never settled....)

But the rise of the new meaning of “ordinary,” meaning “common” or “just the usual,” was thus a modern, or post Reformation event. Howard argued in his book that the rise of the ordinary was the mark of the fall of the sacramental. As the world became rid of sacramental presence, it became something else - the ordinary world. And, of course, with a word like ordinary or usual, it was presumed that the sacramental was thus somehow extraordinary and unusual. As goes the sacrament, so goes God. Adam and Eve had been expelled from the Garden of Eden. With the 16th and 17th century, man returned the favor.

This is another way of speaking about a two-storey universe - a world where there is ordinary and extraordinary, usual and unusual. If one adds to this the sameness of mass-produced goods, and the sameness of the Organization Man, our modern world has little room for either man (as unique) or God. It is hardly surprising that we're as crazy as we are.

Not until we cease to divide the world into ordinary and extraordinary, into usual and unusual, into sacred and secular, will we have either the possibility of knowing God, much less living the Christian life. What substitutes for both is a second-storey belief system that is held up either by rigid abstract dogmatics or various fundamentalisms, or by fear of the abyss of atheism and meaninglessness. The first is not necessary and the second is our own creation.

Father Alexander Schmemmann is quoted as saying that when we bless something, we do not make it into something other than what it is, but reveal it to be what it has always been. This can either be viewed as “theological sleight of hand” or (by some) as somehow lessening the sacraments - making little distinction as it does between ordinary and the holy. On the other hand, when Orthodox priests go to various portions of water at Theophany - the local river, an ocean, a spring, etc., and do the service for the blessings of waters, how far does the blessing extend? Is there a three mile limit to sanctity? We call on the rivers, “the blessing of Jordan.” A similar question: how long does the blessing last? What is the half-life of holiness? We have been blessing all the waters of the world for centuries. Schmemmann's explanation is the only one that makes sense.

It is certainly the case that holy water is holy water - and yet when Christ entered the waters of the Jordan - we are not told that John prayed a blessing over the water. None was necessary. Christ is who He is, and the waters are what they are (and they are more than what many think the waters to be). The icon of the Theophany reveals the Jordan to be Hades itself, the chaos of darkness into which we had plunged ourselves. Christ enters the waters just as at the Cross He entered Hades. In the waters He “crushed the heads of the dragons” (quoting the psalm noted in the prayer of blessing), just as in Hades He crushed that old serpent, the enemy of man.

At Christ's Baptism there is a Theophany, a revealing of God, but there is also an Epiphany, a revealing of the world in its greater meaning. Every tree, every rock, every word and action - all things have their meaning in relationship to God - not as things-in-themselves. And it is only as they are handled as having their meaning in relationship to God that they will be handled rightly. The earth itself bears the scars of man's declaration of ordinariness. It is not a word of blessing but a curse.

My oldest daughter, Matushka Mary, was relating to me some things from the writing of a diocesan priest in the area around Krasnoyarsk, Russia (she lived there for a year). He was commenting on various Scriptural events, with an eye to its typology that was wondrously revelatory. He noted, she said, that Christ took away the curse that had been on the earth when

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he accepted the crown of thorns. The earth had been cursed on account of the first Adam when it was said:

... cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. ” (Genesis 3:17-19)

My daughter (quoting the priest) added, “not only does he bear the thorns brought forth from the earth as in the curse, but for the sweat of man’s brow, he offers His own sweat as blood, when He does the righteous work of prayer and obedience in the Garden of Gethsemane.”

What wonderful images!

But these are images that reveal the ground to be what it now is - blessed because it was the tomb of Christ’s body. The trees, blessed because upon them hung the one who suspended the universe. The rocks are blessed, because they reveal Christ, who as the Rock was cleft and water flowed to save Israel from its thirst. Everything is blessed and revealed as blessed when we know the One Who blessed it. Only in knowing Him do we see the world for what it is, and understand that the gates to Paradise have been opened to us.

Part Five - Living a One-Storey Life

I have chosen to use language of the “first and second storey” to describe the kind of bifurcation that the modern world has experienced over the past several centuries. Its results have been to smash the religious world into “sacred” and “secular” and to make believing both harder and disbelief more natural. Thus, to many atheists their world view seems obvious, while believers try to make leaps of logic and argument that render their own thought more schizophrenic.

There is obviously a problem. I have tried to describe the problems and to suggest why such language is either to be treated as metaphor, at best, or avoided when possible. The Christian faith is that God is with us. The Christian life is lived moment by moment in union with God and in harmony with nature which God has rendered the bearer of the holy and the place of communion.

Living a one storey life can be described as simply living here and now. It is being present to God Who is present to us. It is recognizing the true nature of the created world as the arena of both our struggle and our serenity. Our argument with those who do not believe should not be about whether or not there is a second storey to our universe, but about the true nature of the universe in which we live. Whenever Christians allow the gospel to be shoved upstairs, we have allowed ourselves to be disregarded and the gospel to be marginalized. God did not become flesh and dwell among us in order to establish the truth of a second storey universe: he came to redeem the one we live in. Those who cannot recognize hell among us will also be blind to paradise as well. Christ reveals both. Our daily struggle is to live in the latter and to proclaim the gospel to those who live in the former, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life.

Part Six - Christian Atheism

The title for this post sounds like an oxymoron, and, of course, it is. How can one be both an atheist and a Christian? Again, I am wanting to push the understanding of the one-

versus-two-storey universe. In the history of religious thought, one of the closest versions to what I am describing as a “two-storey” world-view, is that espoused by classical Deism (the philosophy espoused by a number of the American founding fathers).

They had an almost pure, two-storey world view. God, “the Deity,” had created the universe in the beginning, setting it in motion. He had done so in such a way that the world could be described as directed by His Providence, but not in any sense interfered with after its creation. Thomas Jefferson produced a New Testament, wholly in tune with this philosophy. He expunged all reference to miracle and kept only those things he considered to have a purpose in “moral teaching.” The creator had accomplished His work: it was up to us to conform ourselves to His purposes and morality - which were pretty indistinguishable from natural law. If you read the writings of the period it’s much more common to read Providence where a Christian might put God. Many modern evangelicals mistakenly read such statements as Christian.

Functionally, other than having some notion of an original Creator, Deists were practical atheists. The God Who created had completed His work. Ethics were as much a matter of scientific discovery as any other principle of physics. They believed in something they called “God” or “Providence” but only in a very divorced sense. It would be hard to distinguish their thought from that of an atheist except that they clung to an idea of God at least as the initiator of all things.

I have here introduced the notion of “practical atheism,” meaning by it, that although a person may espouse a belief in God, it is quite possible for that belief to be so removed from everyday life, that God’s non-existence would make little difference.

Surprisingly, I would place some forms of Christian fundamentalism within this category (as I have defined it). I recall a group affiliated with some particular Church of Christ, who regularly evangelized our apartment complex when I lived in Columbia, S.C. They were also a constant presence on the campus of the local university. They were absolute inerrantists on the subject of the Holy Scriptures. They were equally adamant that all miracles had ceased with the completion of the canon of the New Testament. Christians today only relate to God through the Bible.

Such a group can be called “Biblicists,” or something, but, in the terminology I am using here, I would describe them as “practical atheists.” Though they had great, even absolutist, faith in the Holy Scriptures, they had no relationship with a God who is living and active and directly involved in their world. Had their notion of a God died, and left somebody else in charge of His heaven, it would not have made much difference so long as the rules did not change.

I realize that this is strong criticism, but it is important for us to understand what is at stake. The more the secular world is exalted as secular, that is, having an existence somehow independent of God, the more we will live as practical atheists - perhaps practical atheists who pray (but for what do we pray?). I would also suggest that the more secular the world becomes for Christians, the more political Christians will become. We will necessarily resort to the same tools and weapons as those who do not believe.

Christianity that has purged the Church of the sacraments, and of the sacramental, have only ideas which can be substituted - the result being the eradication of God from the world in all ways other than theoretical. Of course, since much of modern Christianity functions on this ideological level rather than the level of the God-Who-is among-us, much of Christianity functions in a mode of practical atheism. The more ideological the faith, the more likely its proponents are to espouse what amounts to a practical atheism.

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Orthodox Christianity, with its wealth of dogma and Tradition, could easily be translated into this model - and I have encountered it in such a form. But it is a falsification of Orthodoxy. Sacraments must not be quasi-magical moments in which a carefully defined grace is transmitted to us - they must, instead, threaten to swallow up the whole world. The medieval limitation of sacraments to the number 7 comes far too close to removing sacraments from the world itself. Orthodoxy seems to have declared that there are 7 sacraments solely as a response to Western Reform and Catholic arguments. In some sense, everything is a sacrament - the whole world is a sacrament.

However, if we only say that the whole world is a sacrament, soon nothing will be a sacrament. Thus the sacraments recognized as such by the Church, should serve not just for pointing to themselves, but also pointing to God and to everything around us. Holy Baptism should change all water. The Cross should change all trees, etc. But Baptism gives the definition: water does not define Baptism. Neither do trees define the Cross. Nor does man define Christ. Christ defines what it is to be human, etc.

The more truly sacramental becomes the Christian life, the more thoroughly grounded it is in the God-Who-is-among-us. Such a God is indeed, “everywhere present and filling all things.” Our options are between such a God - as proclaimed in the New Testament - or a God who need be no God at all for He is removed from us anyway.

At the Divine Liturgy, before approaching the Communion Cup, Orthodox Christians pray together:

I believe, O Lord, and I confess that Thou art truly the Christ the Son of the living God who camest into the world to save sinners, of whom I am first. I believe also that this is truly Thine own most pure Body, and that this is truly Thine own precious Blood. Therefore, I pray Thee: have mercy upon me and forgive my transgressions both voluntary and involuntary, of word and of deed, committed in knowledge or in ignorance. And make me worthy to partake without condemnation of Thy most pure Mysteries, for the remission of my sins, and unto life everlasting. Amen.

There is not a single hint of a distance between us and God. At this point, having prepared for communion, having confessed our sins, we stand at the very center of the universe, before the God Who Is, before the God with Whom Moses conversed on Mt. Sinai, and we receive His true Body and Blood.

Such realism of a first-storey character makes bold claims about the nature of the God whom we worship and how it is that we relate to Him. It's removal from the “end of miracles” deism of some Biblicists could not be more complete.

There is a dialog that may take place between Christians and atheists. But there is, prior to that, an even more important dialog to be had, and that is with the practical atheism of Christians who have exiled God from the world around us. Such practical atheism is a severe distortion of the Christian faith and an extremely poor substitute for the real thing.

Richard John Neuhaus has written frequently of returning the Church to the public square. I think the problem is far deeper. In many cases we have to speak about returning God to the Church. In cases where practical atheism is the faith of a group of “believers,” their presence in the public square makes no difference. Who cares?

But within the Orthodox faith, God cannot be exiled from our world no matter how men try. He has come among us, and not at our invitation. “While we were yet sinners, Christ died

for us” (Romans 5:8). He is already in the Public Square as the Crucified God who is reconciling the world to Himself, whether we like it or not. The opposite of practical atheism is to do the only thing the Christianity of the first-storey can do: keep His commandments and fall down and worship - for God is with us.

Part Seven - Icons in a One Storey Universe

I'll ask my readers to forgive me as I look at yet another aspect of the Christian life when the idea of a two-storey universe is jettisoned and we come to realize that we are living in a one-storey world: that God is with us. Readership has remained very high over the past week or so, so I will take that to mean that many people are interested in this approach and the insights it brings.

Icons are popularly referred to as “windows to heaven.” This is one of the places where language breaks down. If you are using language in a two-storey world, “heaven” is the equivalent of “upstairs.” It would thus be very peculiar to describe something as being a “window to upstairs.” The very language of the Church shows that it means something quite different.

Icons are not windows to another world, per se, but are a revelation of the truth of existence. When we paint an icon of a saint, the effort is to paint the saint in the truth of their life, not in their mere historical appearance. Thus the symbolism of the Byzantine style, points us towards the holiness of a saint. The same thing could be achieved by writing their lives - but an icon does the same with a single picture.

The same is true of icons depicting Biblical scenes. The icon of the crucifixion famously contains many elements that you would not literally have seen that day in Jerusalem - but if you knew the Truth of all that was happening - then you would know all that is shown in the icon.

This is one of the great difficulties of our one-storey world. It's not that we live on the first floor and that's all there is - it's that we live on the first floor and we don't know the half of it. We do not realize the true nature of where we are or when we are. Icons frequently show us much about the world as it truly is. This is the character of much of the lives we read about in the saints - they not only see what we see - they see much more. Indeed, we are told, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” This is not a reference to a notion that if you're pure in heart, someday you will die and see the Lord. This completely misunderstands the verse.

The verse tells us that the primary organ of vision for human beings is not the eye, but the heart. Our eyes will only see what our hearts will allow. Thus we almost never see the truth of our enemies - as our language says, “We are blinded to the truth.” Anger blinds. Hatred blinds. Greed blinds. Politics blind. Many things blind.

Thus a great part of the Orthodox life is living in such a way that we will be able to see more and more clearly the truth of our own existence and of the world around us. There are those (non-Orthodox) who view the making and venerating of icons as a non-essential in Christianity. They may be willing to tolerate it, but see no necessity in it. Making and venerating icons, in the wisdom of the Church, is not only pleasant, but quite necessary. The veneration of an icon is an essential part of actually seeing it. The persons or situations that are presented to us in an icon are situations that call for humility of heart and a feeling of reverence. In some cases the reverence is so deep that we not only kiss the icon involved, we actually prostrate ourselves to the ground before it before we kiss it (this is the case in the Holy Cross and in the Burial Shroud of Christ).

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We have a culture where people bow themselves before money, before food, before the flesh, before power, before almost anything but not the things of God. Our hearts are thus poisoned and our vision becomes clouded. We cannot see or judge anything correctly. We do not see or know the true God, nor do we see our neighbors for who they truly are. The only corrective is to live a life learning to rightly honor those things that should be honored. If kissing an icon seems foreign, it may be merely cultural, but, mind you, ours is a culture that has not taught us how to honor the things of God.

When someone is entering the Church through Baptism they renounce the devil and have prayers of exorcism read over them. Then they turn towards the East, towards the altar of God, and are told to worship Him. At that point they bow to the ground for the first time. They are then given the Creed to recite. There is an understanding that unless you bow down to the Lord God and worship Him, the words of the Creed will remain closed to you. You will not hear them rightly nor find them to be for your salvation.

Thus we walk through this one-storey world and pray to have our eyes opened. We make the sign of the cross frequently, almost as if we were brushing away the clouds of delusion that rise up from everything around us. We invoke the name of Christ without ceasing, begging His mercy.

Icons are windows - to heaven. But heaven is a window on this world. Christ Himself told us that the Kingdom of God is among us. Blessed be His name and may we see with pure hearts what only the Light of Christ can illumine.

The Desert - Struggling in a One-Storey Universe

One of the best-known sayings to have come from the Desert Fathers is: "Stay in your cell and your cell will teach you everything." To a large degree the saying extols the virtue of stability. Moving from place to place never removes the problem - it only postpones the inevitable. Somewhere, sometime we have to face the heart of our struggle and by the grace of God overcome. Of course, not everyone is entirely successful in such struggles in the course of this life. How our healing is completed beyond this life is left to the mystery of grace.

There is nothing secular about the desert, the arena of our spiritual struggle. The early monastics who fled to the desert for prayer did not think that they were avoiding problems by seeking out such solitude. St. Athanasius, in the 4th century, had written the Life of St. Antony, one of the first and greatest of all hermits. That book, in a time before printing presses and book agents, still became a "best-seller." It was read by many and propelled literally hundreds of thousands of young men and women into the monastic life. Modern Christians are overwhelmed when they hear the estimates of the number of monastics by the 5th century. It is hard to believe that the desert could sustain so many.

But that book on the life of St. Antony, held no romanticism for the desert life. Antony's life of prayer is also a life of struggle against demons. They literally toss him about and beat him up. If anything, such a novel should have made generations afraid to go near the desert.

In the 6th chapter of Ephesians, St. Paul had written:

Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places (11-12).

St. Paul's observation that the struggle was against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places (literally the "heavenlies") clearly did not dissuade the hordes of hermits from invading the deserts of Africa and the Mideast or the islands and caves of Gaul and the British Isles. One simple reason was that the "heavenlies" was not a description of a two-storey (or more) universe, but simply a description of the nature of the struggle. Those "heavenly places" were as much the territory of the human heart as anything. St. Macarius, a desert dweller, would write:

The heart itself is but a small vessel, yet dragons are there, and there are also lions; there are poisonous beasts and all the treasures of evil. But there too is God, the angels, the life and the kingdom, the light and the apostles, the heavenly cities and the treasuries of grace — all things are there. (H.43.7)

The heavenly cities are not to be found in contemplating some second storey of the universe, but are to be found within the terrible (in the classic sense of the word) confines of the human heart. This was the great promise of the desert: that in solitude and quiet, through prayer and fasting, a man could enter the depths of his heart and there do the warfare that had been given to us to do. Some few became great saints. Others found only madness. Orthodox Christianity received something of a handbook on warfare in that land of the heart in such writings as the Lives of the Fathers, the Philokalia, The Ladder of Divine Ascent, and other similar works. They have remained staples of the spiritual life ever since.

The struggle in the desert does not ignore relationships with other human beings. But it recognizes that the trouble in those relationships does not lie in other human beings, but within my own heart. Christ did not suffer from trouble in His relationships with humanity. He was at peace with all. We cannot do more than be like Christ, who Himself began His ministry in the desert, defeating the enemy.

Later Orthodox reflection has widened the desert and recognized that it includes all territory. There is no place we go where the struggle can be differently defined. In the city, in a factory, an office or in school, the battlefield of our spiritual life remains within our own heart. Solitude is only a tool in learning to recognize that fact and to focus our attention on where our attention needs to be.

Obviously, most of us do not leave the company of other human beings in our journey to salvation. But we should draw proper conclusions from the men and women who first entered the deserts and left us the records of their struggles. We do not labor in a secular land beneath the watchful eye of second-storey perfection. We labor in the land where heavenly wickedness does its battle: the human heart. And if our hearts are where the arena is to be found, then we should recognize as well that it is in that very arena that the great "cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) is to be found as well. The vast array of saints described by St. Paul in his Letter to the Hebrews who, having completed the course of their warfare, now surround us as spectators in the arena of our warfare, should themselves not be relegated to some distant second-storey where they watch us from afar. Thus it is not a strange thing that those who do spiritual warfare best also have many friends among the saints, and learn to call on them for aid. For though it may seem like "my" struggle, it is the struggle of all who name Christ as Lord. The saints do not surround us like a great cloud of witnesses in idle curiosity. They surround us to strengthen and aid us, to encourage us, and even, if need be, to fight along side us. Such is our heavenly warfare of the heart.

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To spend time with someone who has learned well the battle of the heart is to sit at the gate of paradise. On some few occasions I have had opportunity to meet such warriors. The peace that is theirs, the complete lack of self-consciousness are signals that you have come to a new country. Such living witnesses are the loudest proclamation of the gospel known on earth. For in their heart, God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. These are the dwelling places of the New Jerusalem and the living promises of God. Their hearts point us to the place where we should be engaging the struggle and remind us that with God all things are possible.

Icons - A Room with a View

Dreams are interesting things - our modern age either makes too little of them or too much of them - but mostly, we believe our dreams are about us and about the inside of our heads. Those who make too little of their dreams write them off to anxiety or other stresses of the day - wish fulfillment - or a variety of other mundane causes. Those who make too much of them remind me of those who are Western believers in reincarnation - they always seem to have been somebody famous - while their dreaming counterparts always try to find the meaning of the universe or something equally significant in the slightest symbol. I don't mean to sound so jaundiced on the subject, but I once spent a week at a Jungian Conference (long ago and far away and definitely in a different galaxy). Such a week can make you afraid to go to sleep.

But dreams certainly have a significance - and as shown in Scripture, they can indeed be sent by God. My favorite Biblical dream is that of Jacob, who sees a ladder stretching into the heavens and angels going up and coming down. His reaction upon waking was to attribute the dream to the place in which he was sleeping: "This is none other than the gate of heaven and the house of God!" And, of course, as the good patriarch that he was he erected a stone and anointed it with oil.

Years ago, some years before I became Orthodox, I had a dream in which I was in a Church. Its construction was of log-timber and it was obvious to me that it was an Orthodox Church. There were icons and lampadas, and a sizable crowd of people. What fascinated me about this dream-Church were its many rooms. Everywhere you went there were steps up and steps down and rooms here and rooms there and all of them full of people and icons and lampadas and the faint smell of incense and the low murmur of worship and prayers. I remember the dream lasting quite a while, but with nothing more significant than the many rooms - and how it felt to be there.

That feeling is what remained with me when I awoke and remains with me to this day. The description I have given is probably the best I can do, for I have no words for how it felt, other than to say it felt like an Orthodox Church - but an almost endless Orthodox Church.

Having written a week or so back about the Christian life lived in a one-storey universe, I am reminded of that Church in my dream. It was certainly a one-storey Church - and yet it constantly opened up into place after place.

This week I am studying the painting (or writing if you prefer) of icons. They are often called "windows to heaven." In the Church of my dream, or certainly within the metaphor it has left in my heart, I also think of them as doors to another room. Each saint, each icon of Christ or of the Theotokos, opens not just to heaven, but to ever deeper rooms within the world in which we inhabit. To spend time with an icon is not to visit some other place only to return to where you were before, but is to enter another room though you never left where you were. The world is changed, enlarged. What seemed small and insignificant is suddenly expanded and filled with meaning. The finite is filled with the infinite and becomes inexhaustible.

I remember waking from my dream years ago, and aching with a hunger for something I could not name. But I know now that it was a hunger for heaven - and not for a heaven somewhere else, but for heaven on earth - which in Orthodox dogma - is indeed the Church.

What Do You See Outside Your Window? Evil in a One-Storey Universe

A question was put several days back about what would be said about “evil in a one-storey universe?” Of course, as I’ve thought about the question, my simplest conclusion is to wonder how one would give an account of evil in a two-storey universe. For it seems that those who have imagined the universe as a two-storey affair have largely confined evil here and proposed that the second-floor has been swept clean. Heaven above and earth below, and a basement yet to come where the evil will at least be confined in everlasting flames. Of course the multi-storey version of good and evil do nothing to solve the problem and do much to create a secular no-man’s land, increasingly populated with those who cannot believe in either a second-storey nor a basement and frequently see believers among the evil in this world (if only to complicate matters).

Of course, the two Biblical books that treat the imagery of spiritual warfare with the evil one in the most literal fashion, have Satan standing before God and holding converse about the long-suffering Job (in the book of the same name) and engaged in a “war in heaven” with St. Michael and the angels in the other (the Revelation of St. John). In neither account is the location of great significance, for the center of action in both books is not “heaven” but rather earth - with St. Job’s sufferings in the one, and the various plagues and misfortunes befalling the earth in the other. Indeed, if the drama of either book is examined, the “heavenly” scenes, are rather more like ante-rooms than an upper-storey.

But the question remains - what account do we give of evil if we speak of the universe in the language of a single storey? I am a believer and as such generally find the source of evil in the abuse of free will, whether of human beings or on the part of heavenly beings (the demonic). Nor do I see that account as different than the theological account to be found in the Fathers. What I bear witness to as a believer, however, is less an account of the origin of evil than to my faith that our universe, though caught in the throes of death and decay, has nevertheless been entered by its Creator, who having taken flesh of the Virgin, has entered into the very depths of death and decay - themselves the result of evil - and defeated them. And thus I see this one-storey world in which I live as the active stage upon which that same victory is being manifest. I cannot say in the least that I see that victory increasingly manifest - for the Christian account of the world is not an account of progress towards the Kingdom of God, but a witness to the fact that the Kingdom of God has entered our world and there is nothing we can do about it. We can, of course, repent, believe the Gospel, and by God’s grace come to know that Kingdom within our selves and within the world in which we live (all of which is the gift of God) but we will also know that Kingdom in the midst of this same storey, which continues to lie in darkness and to endure the presence and work of evil.

Of course, there is much conversation about the metaphysics of evil and the nature of hell and eternal punishment - and though I have recommended articles on the same that I find of value - I think that a large amount of Christian energy is wasted on such matters. For it is not the mastery of the metaphysics of the universe that makes any difference, but rather the embrace of the Gospel of Christ and obedience to His commandments. Those who point to the plenitude of evil around us will get little argument from me, other than to say that what appears to be a plenitude is a “kingdom” that cannot stand, and that its end will come. I received a post that

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got lost in the spam yesterday complaining of the evil within the world, and wondering how I could speak of “heaven on earth.” I cannot think of anywhere else to speak of it, since all I know of heaven is what came forth from the tomb at Pascha. That same resurrected Christ is now Head of His body, the Church, and I cannot know of how to speak of that Body if it is not heaven on earth (despite all that we sinners may drag within her) but all the sickness that enters the doors of a hospital do not make it less a place a healing - I cannot do other with the Body of Christ but bear witness to the very fact that it exists for nothing other than healing. The only weakness within the Church is when we “patients” forget why we came in its doors in the first place, and begin to imagine either that we are already healed, or worse, that someone has turned us into the medical staff.

But though the one-storey world as we know it is itself a cosmic war zone, I cannot lose hope when I know that the end of the battle has already been accomplished in the coming of Christ. I wait for its manifestation - but having known the risen Lord - I wait with hope and run the race with patience. What else are we supposed to do?

Time in a One-Storey Universe

It seems to me as I've looked over my posts on the “one-storey” world, that one thing I have not paid much attention to is time. Part of the “two-storey” construct which dominates our modern world-view, is a tendency to view time in a purely linear, historical progression. Thus for some very conservative two-storey Christians, time begins at creation, and moves along in a linear fashion. Thus the timing of Adam and the fall become critical historical problems. There are those who are thus forced to argue for a “young earth.” A museum opened this past year in which the young earth was celebrated, the dinosaurs depicted as cohabiting the world with Adam and Eve. It adds a whole new dimension to life in the Garden of Eden.

This same treatment of time may have an emphasis on the “last days,” in some cases arguing strongly that we are in just such days. The “Left Behind” series of novels celebrates this linear view. And although, properly speaking, the end of history may be referred to as the “eschaton,” the linear, two-storey version of time and life on earth, actually lacks an eschatological dimension. There is nothing about the end that is different from the rest of time with the sole factor of its timing. It is the end, because it is the last thing in a long progression. Prophecy about such an end is not about the nature of things, but simply about the progression of things. This is not Biblical eschatology.

Of course, this is a hallmark of the two-storey world view. It is inherently secular (even when it's religious). That which is significant and of everlasting value has been placed “off world” in a second-storey. This world simply continues until it is brought to its cataclysmic end, trucks running off the road, airplanes crashing, and all the rest of the tragic scenario of Dispensationalism (of course it's quite possible to be a two-storey Christian without at the same time being a Dispensationalist).

However, as noted, this modernized world-view has no proper eschatology, and does not have a proper Christian view of time. Christ, we are told in Scripture, is the “Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End” (Rev. 21:6). This is not simply a way of saying that He is eternal and was here when everything was created and will be here when everything ends. To view Him in such a manner, is to privilege creation in a way that sets it on a par with God, only shorter.

Scripture does not tell us that Christ was the Alpha and He will be the Omega - He is already both, always. When Christ walked among His disciples, the end of the age had come

upon them. It is thus that His ministry is marked with the character of a “Jubilee” year, the 50th year in the Sabbath Cycle, in which everything is set free, and restored to its proper owner and order. Thus when St. John the Baptist sends word to ask whether Christ is the Messiah, Christ’s answer is couched in the language of the Jubilee:

Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me (Matt. 11:4-6).

In the same vein He announces His ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth:

And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord” (Luke 4:16-19).

This passage is a traditional Jubilee passage. The Jubilee itself, though occurring every 50 years, is also a type of the eschaton, the Great Day of the Lord, when the Judge will come and all things will be set right. The healing ministry of Jesus must be seen in this light. He does what He does, because He is the Omega, and where He walks the Jubilee has come. He is the End of History tabernacling in time.

By the same token - all that is associated with Him takes on this same cast. Thus, we are no longer citizens of this world, but citizens of Heaven:

But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,²¹ who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself (Philippians 3:20-21).

Thus the Church, though in this world, is not of this world. Properly, the Church is an eschatological moment. It Baptizes into the death of Christ and raises in the likeness of His resurrection, thus casting time aside and treating these historical events as present, because in the presence of Christ all moments are present. The Church eats of an eschatological meal, enjoying the food of the Messianic banquet now, because in Christ that moment is already made present to the Church.

Dostoevsky’s famous Grand Inquisitor is a frontal assault on the Church acting not as eschatological community but the arbiter of history. In Dostoevsky “poem,” the Grand Inquisitor will have nothing to do with Christ other than to threaten Him for heresy and subject Him to the Inquisition. The Church will achieve what it sees God has having failed to do. There are a thousand ways to run this story - whether it is the Liberation Theology of South America, or the Swastika bedecked Churches who sought to Baptize a demoniac regime. At points in time Christians have lost the proper identity of the Church as an eschatological moment and, through various schemes and arrangements, has either sought to prop up regimes that were judged useful to the Church’s needs, or even to have simply replaced the regime with the Church itself. This is the ultimate triumph of secularism. To declare the Church as the Kingdom Come

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when it is living as nothing of the sort is to dress up a donkey and call him “Aslan.” Some may fall for it, but none of us should. It is a false eschatology.

The act of forgiveness is a true eschatological triumph. Trapped in history, modern man sees no way forward but to fight for domination: to the victor goes the spoils. Forgiveness is weakness and a good way to lose tomorrow what we gained yesterday. However, in radical obedience to the gospel of Christ, Christians behave in an eschatological manner: we forgive our enemies because we have already seen the outcome of history in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and thus do not need to force the behavior of our enemies in order to create a desired outcome. In the light of Christ’s triumph, we may forgive those who hurt us, because we know of the forgiveness that is and will be ours. The forgiveness of enemies is a proclamation of the victory of Christ - both now and forever.

The resurrection itself is the great sign of our forgiveness. Having obtained death as the outcome of our disobedience, we obtain the forgiveness of death in our resurrection. In a thousand ways in which the life of the Church is made manifest in this world - it shows forth not a linear progression through history - but an inbreaking of the Kingdom. Time has been ruptured, fulfilled, overcome.

We may live in a one-storey universe - but this one-storey universe is not a linear progression of events. It is the arena in which the Lord of time, transcends time. It is the arena in which the Cause is born in the midst of time. Thus St. Maximus can say that the “incarnation is the cause of all things.” In this one-storey universe icons become windows to heaven, doorways to the eschaton, for each portrayal in an icon is drawn in an eschatological manner. Thus we can see an icon of St. John the Baptist (with his head on his shoulders) with his head also on a charger lying at his feet. This is only possible for we are seeing all things together as we gaze through a window that shatters the boundaries of time.

It is also a reason why it is quite problematic when Orthodox Christians see themselves primarily as the keepers and conservers of the past. We do not look back and think that the 1st century was the best; or the 4th; or the 8th; or the 15th; or the 19th, etc. We are “stewards of the mysteries of God,” which no time can limit or define. We are the same Church in the 21st century as we were in the 1st century because we have always been the Church which is Christ’s eschatological bride. We are the Church of all centuries because we will be and are the Church at the end of the age.

Blessed is the Kingdom, of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

Unbelief and the Two-Storey Universe

April 29, 2009 by fatherstephen

I have written extensively about what I have described as a “two-storey universe.” In short, this is a description of how many modern Christians see the world. There is the first floor - the natural world which operates according to naturalist, “secular” rules, and the second floor - the world of God, heaven, hell, angels, etc. The spiritual crisis of much of modern man is the inherent disconnect in these two worlds. It is a belief construct whose history goes back some centuries but whose fruit has been a very different form of Christianity and a growing tide of unbelief. As I have written elsewhere, many Christians have serious doubts about whether anybody actually lives on the second floor.

One interesting component of this world-view is unbelief. When a Christian whose world-view is dominated by the two-storey universe ceases to believe - what he ceases to believe in is the second storey. There need be little change, if any, to the first-floor on which he perceives himself to live. He does not cease to believe in the God who is here, but in a God who is “out there.”

Of course, what remains in such a situation of unbelief, is an acceptance of a universe that is less than a full account of how things truly are. The first floor of a two-storey universe is not the same thing as the “one-storey universe” I have described: it is simply a house with the second floor blown off. It is in this sense that I have commented on Christian fundamentalism (one of the primarily proponents of the two-storey universe) and contemporary atheism being two-sides of the same coin. Their interminable arguments are a conversation that takes place in half a universe. One argues that there is a second floor while the other argues that the truncated, detached debacle of a first floor is all there is. However, they do not disagree about the fundamentals of the first floor. The daily world (and often the daily life) of a two-storey Christian is often as empty and secular as his atheist counterpart. He differs only in his anxiety to prove the existence of a second floor.

I believe it is important to go to the heart of these matters - to realize that when arguments take place between such inhabitants of the two-storey world - nothing authentic is taking place. Both positions are inheritors of a broken view of the world and neither will ever state the truth in a satisfactory manner.

It is interesting to me that there are atheists who do not belong to this category of “two-storey unbelievers.” Their lack of belief in God includes deep questions about the very character of the universe and the nature of human existence. As such, they share much in common with the Tradition of the Orthodox faith. Many converts to Orthodoxy must undergo something of an “atheist” stage in order to leave the mythology of the two-storey world and enter into the revelation of God as Christ has given to the Church. It is for this reason that in the services for the reception of converts there is included a formal renunciation of various errors. You cannot follow the “only truly existing God” while at the same time believing in a God who does not exist. We are to believe in but one God.

I recall the first year of my life as an Orthodox Christian. Having been an ordained clergyman for 18 years prior to that, it startled people when I said that the primary question for me in my first year of Orthodox life was the existence of God. People asked, “Did you not believe in God before?” The answer had to be “yes and no.” To embrace God as He is revealed to us in the Orthodox faith requires, as well, not believing a number of other things. That first year was a struggle.

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On the other hand, the same year forced me to a far more existential level - even to the place of crisis. How to believe in a God who is “everywhere present and filling all things” is a very different way of life than to believe in a God who is “out there.” In an Orthodox life our faith in God also changes how we see everything else (or it should). Nothing remains the same. The creation is not “self-existent” (a hallmark of two-storey thought) but utterly dependent and contingent moment by moment on the good will and providence of God. “Heaven and earth are full of His glory.”

I have found it interesting in my ministry as an Orthodox priest and missionary to meet people who, upon learning of the Orthodox faith, have replied with joy, “I always thought something like that must be true.” There are many people, who though never having heard the Gospel presented in its proper fullness, have nevertheless refused to be content with something less. They are, for me, miracles of grace.

It is a commonplace to say that Orthodoxy is full of paradoxes. One of those is the paradox that many non-Orthodox Christians may have to leave their God in order to become Orthodox and that many atheists will have to learn not to believe in a different God before they can come to the Truth.

It is simply the case that in order to find our life we have to lose it.

Postscript: The Presence in the Absence

A Timely Re-posting

April 30, 2009 by fatherstephen

This short post is among the first to appear on this blog - dating back to October of '06. In the light of conversations here over the past few days, it seemed timely to bring this back to our attention. I have written on the topic of the absence of God (or our sense of it) since the beginning of my work. And even though conversations with contemporary non-believers can be tedious - they are very much worth having - if for no other reason than most Christians have a great deal of non-belief in their hearts. I also believe it is the particular calling of contemporary Orthodox (in this I follow St. Silouan of Mt. Athos) to empty ourselves and enter the abyss of the spiritual hell our world has created for itself and there preach and pray - for it is there that the contemporary Adam has confined himself - and it is there that we must also find Christ. The emptiness of the secularized world - the first floor of a two-storey universe - is a man-made hell, the place in which we have exiled ourselves from God. We will not find God by looking elsewhere for it is here that He is present and filling all things. It is the mystery of our faith. I have reposted this original article without change.

There is a strange aspect to the presence of God in the world around us. That aspect is His apparent absence. I read with fascination (because I am no philosopher, much less a scientist) the discussions surrounding “intelligent design” and the like. I gather that everybody agrees that the universe is just marvelous and wonderfully put together (I can't think of a better universe). But then begins the parting of ways as one sees God everywhere and another sees Him nowhere. Reason surely need not deny Him, though reason does not seem forced to acknowledge Him. I have spent most of my life around these arguments - one place or another. I can stand in either place and see both presence and absence.

But as the years have gone by, I have come to see something I never saw before - the Presence within the absence. I don't mean to sound too mystical here - only that I see in the hiddenness of God a revelation of His love. The Creator of us all draws us towards Himself and knowledge of Him, with hints and intimations, with seen and yet unseen signs.

The strange deniability that He leaves us is the space in which love is born. Love cannot be forced, cannot be demanded. It must come as gift, born of a willingness to give. To give God trust that what I see is indeed evidence of the wisdom in which He made all things is also a space - one which God fills with Himself and the echo, the Yes, that the universe shouts back to us.

It is where I grow weary of the arguments - not because they need not be made - but because it becomes hard to hear the silence in the noise of our own voices - a silence that invites us to hear the sound of the voice of God that rumbles all around us.

There's more to say - but not now.

Everywhere Present

By fatherstephen

Everything you do, all your work, can contribute towards your salvation. It depends on you, on the way you do it. History is replete with monks who became great saints while working in the kitchen or washing sheets. The way of salvation consists in working without passion, in prayer....

May God give you the strength to keep your spirit, your mind, and your heart in the spirit of Christ. Then everything that happens to you can very quickly be radically transformed. What was tiresome and discouraging will disappear, transfigured by your desire to be there where Christ your God is....

Elder Sophrony

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The wise elder's words are not only good for our salvation (which is always at hand) but reminds us that we should not divide our lives into two worlds. Even monks have to wash dishes...

If we concede that some of our life is drudgery, mindless, but needful, while other parts of our life are interesting and of value to God, then we have ourselves created a two-storey universe of our inner world. This part of my life is of no value - while this part is of great value. This, of course, is nonsense. Even service in the Holy Altar frequently consists in washing dishes.

The words of the elder teach us that the problem of the two-storey universe is to be found primarily in our own heart - not in the culture around us nor in the tasks we find at hand. God is everywhere present and filling all things. He is even present and filling the various tasks of "drudgery" we undertake. No task is beneath us. The Mother of God changed the diapers of the God of heaven. Our love for those around us should be no less. We are moved when we read in John that 'Jesus wept' at the grave of Lazarus, His friend. The Theotokos had long before heard Him weep and wail as all children do. Nor should any mother (or father) give less value to the weeping of their own children. God has invested everything with His love, transforming the world into the stage of our salvation. Glory to God for all things.