

The God of the Gaps

One of the more enduring snipes at Christianity, if not religions more widely, is the characterisation of our Faith as the *God of the gaps*. It derives its animus from what was certainly the humbling of the Church as many phenomena ascribed to direct divine action were explained through the discoveries of science.

The Church – certainly the Western Church – did not handle the flowering of scientific advance well, despite the fact that many of its roots lay in the experimentation, investigation and inquiry of avowedly Christian people – often clerics or religious. Pope Pius X enforced a vow against modernity on all Roman Catholic clergy at the beginning of the twentieth century; and most Anglican bishops of that time were equally strident in their resistance, though lacking the levers available to the Pontiff.

The result has been that we have found ourselves more-or-less continually on the back foot in this age of science, which continues through the present generation and doubtless into the future. In a very real sense, we were victims of our own vanity, believing that we knew everything there was to know, understanding all that there was to understand and constructing our self-image on that supposed omni-competence.

The root meaning of vanity is emptiness – that is, when we peer into the picture we create of ourselves, we find that what we claim is not really there. As the Old Testament lesson makes clear, the supreme vanity – the vanity of vanities – is to assure ourselves that we are self-sufficient: that we are able to work sufficiently hard, to study sufficiently profoundly, to live sufficiently ethically that there is no more to be achieved.

The theme of the Old Testament is picked up in the Gospel reading where the rich man has become so wrapped up in his wealth that it is all of which he thinks; but in a trice God takes it away – and he is left with nothing as he travels to the next world.

The advance of science has been for the Church a similar reckoning. For centuries, theologians and canonists picked over the details refining and further refining the minutiae of Christian doctrine, oftentimes *ad absurdum*. Yet all the while the seed of science was germinating in the monasteries and vicarages of Europe and little by little it broke through the shell of ecclesiastical complacency rather like those weeds have risen from the concrete in my yard.

Viewing the burgeoning scientific data as weeds in her beautiful theological garden the Church tried to cut them down – even poison them, when her response should have been to use the considerable intellectual resources at her disposal to incorporate the fruits of this growing source of knowledge into her own wisdom.

We are beginning to do this now; but the legacy of our past is still heavy. The puncturing of our vanity has been humbling, if not humiliating. Yet, this has taught us a valuable lesson. The proper disposition before the infinity of God's creative work is humility, for

we cannot know everything; and the recognition of the partiality of our knowledge will, in fact, improve our proclamation.

In the first place, mindful of our ignorance, it will restrain the arrogance to which we can be prone in stating our case; and secondly, it will make it all the easier for us to accommodate and assimilate new information as it emerges.

However, this humility, which is proper before the world is not simply a discipline for ourselves; it is also an example that we can set and recommend to those managing the more secular dynamics of our society.

Whilst, of course, many strands influence world development, we might take two as examples: one is science itself and the other is capitalism.

Adam Smith, the great exponent of Capitalism, said that for it to work perfectly, the markets must be privy to all the relevant information – otherwise, the responses of those markets will be dysfunctional; and since nobody can ever be sure they know everything they need to know and rarely, if ever, succeed in such a quest, the functioning of the markets could not be the perfect servant of society as its proponents often suggest.

Similarly, scientific explanation is always vulnerable to the next discovery. An incomplete set of facts can paint a very misleading picture. Furthermore, knowledge rarely, of itself, can explain how it should be applied: that question of how we should employ the understanding unearthed in laboratories requires a broader skill-set than that developed by scientific training.

Science and capitalism have their gaps, just like the Church's theology; but whereas we were accustomed to insert the direct intervention of God into these holes, the exponents of these other disciplines are tempted simply to ignore them, leading them to assert their views with a self-confidence, which matches that of the Medieval theologians.

It is often said that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, since we do not know sufficient to realise how little we know. It is but a short step from this ignorance, gilded with scanty knowledge, to the intellectual vanity that we know everything.

Every bit as much as wealth, knowledge can stimulate within us an arrogance about ourselves: that like the man in the Gospel, we can quickly think that we have it all – and by our own endeavour. It is the sin first described in the story of the Tower of Babel, but which has perjured the generations; and it is a sin that brings catastrophe in its wake: a sin from which we must repent. It behoves all of us – theologians, financiers, scientists – to concede that in the face of this infinite creation, our knowledge is, in fact, infinitesimal.

In the second reading, the Colossians are encouraged to strip away the old self, the old behaviour so that they can progress towards true knowledge. It is interesting to contemplate what difference it would make to human commerce in its broadest sense if

we could all of us, theologians, financiers and scientists assume a properly tentative presentation of our views, conceding the gaps in our knowledge and the part that other disciplines could play in expanding our own expertise.

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