

Obedience and Knowledge

The duty of obedience requires all to give due honor to authority and to treat those who are charged to exercise it with respect, and, insofar as it is deserved, with gratitude and good will.

--Catechism of the Catholic Church #1900

Those who are familiar with my works know how much I love to talk about the many dualisms of Christianity, particularly the dualism of purity and truth. No single dualism can fully capture the entirety of Christianity, but I do believe no other dualism comes as close to doing so as this one does. I have found it to be especially useful, mainly because nearly every theological discussion I find myself in can be analyzed with this dynamic. I do admit, however, that the dualism of "heart and head" is a great way to introduce others to what I mean by purity and truth.

Most Christians tend towards the purity side of the dualism, while I tend towards the truth. This can make a significant communication barrier at times, as the difference this makes in world views is massive. And I can't blame others for leaning towards purity. I suspect there are certain psychological reasons that encourage others to go that way, but I think the main attraction is that purity is usually more agreeable than truth. Things such as beauty, joy, forgiveness, charity (and other forms of love), evangelization, mercy, and most other aspects that are appealing about Christianity can be found under the auspice of purity. In contrast, things such as education, self-examination, contemplation, justice, and apologetics are all found under truth. These aspects of Christianity are rarely described as being pleasurable, no matter how important they may be.

Take the dualism of apologetics and evangelization, for example. It seems to me that many Christians are indeed excited to tell everyone about Jesus, saints and biblical passages. But when I ask such people if there is any biblical evidence to support the idea that Mary was born without Original Sin, most of them give me blank stares. This is not a trivial matter. While the greatest difference between apostolic churches (Catholic, Orthodox and Anglican) and protestants is the matter of justification vs. sanctification, it has been my experience that protestants are much more interested in why Catholics pray to Mary and other saints. It seems to always be the first or second question they ask when they find out I'm Catholic. Notice how this question has the protestant recognizing the purity aspect of Catholicism (canonization of saints), and is actively seeking the truth behind it. This protestant is clearly curious about this part of the Catholic faith, and is giving the Catholic his full attention. Can you, the gentle reader, give a good explanation for it, or will the protestant walk away thinking that there is nothing substantial to the Catholic faith?

Likewise, it seems that while everyone wants to reap converts, few are willing to sow the seeds of faith in the futile soil of a skeptic's mind. Again, we see that reaping is agreeable. It's relatively easy, the fruits of it are at hand, and it gives cause to celebrate. It's what priests, ministers and preachers talk about in homilies and sermons, and what is being taught in all forms of religious education. On the other hand, sowing is hard, and one rarely sees anything encouraging while doing it. But if no one sows, then there is nothing to reap. I daresay that the skeptics who ultimately convert are doing a much better job in planting these seeds in their own minds than having them sown by their Christian acquaintances, but that is a separate topic. But there is an aspect of purity that is essential to the Christian, yet is neither seen as pleasurable, nor is it embraced well -- obedience.

Obedience clearly falls on the purity side of Judaism and Christianity. It is true that one can

learn truth through obedience (indeed, it is a major theme of this paper), but the reverse is not true -- one cannot arrive at obedience by thinking about it. "By obeying one learns how to obey." (George MacDonald, *Sir Gibbie*, chapter 47) My opinion that people tend towards the pure because it is agreeable seems to be supported by the fact that the disagreeable parts of purity, such as obedience, are shied away from ("Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' but do not do what I command?" Luke 6:46) If we are honest with ourselves, there are many times when we are obedient, yet do as little as possible while doing so. Jesus certainly does not accept this either -- "We are unprofitable servants; we have done what we were obliged to do." (Luke 17:10)

But while obedience is an unpopular form of purity, it is an essential form. The very first set of instructions God gave man included a warning against eating of the Tree of Knowledge (Genesis 2:16-17). I don't want to go off on a tangent and discuss what "knowledge" means here, but it ought to be self-evident that "knowledge" would fall on the "truth" side of the dualism. God explicitly commanded obedience before knowledge. The entire third chapter of Genesis talks about what happens when knowledge takes place before obedience.

Nor does this lesson end here. The Old Testament is filled with prophecies and "types" (as in "typology," the term actually comes from Romans 5:12-14) of future events and people. Jesus alone had over 300 prophecies and a similar number of types for Him found in the Old Testament. Almost none of Biblical prophecies and types, especially the long term ones, manifested in an expected way. Many prophecies still remain to be fulfilled. Jews and Christians do not believe in these prophecies because they make sense. One cannot measure the "progress" of a yet to be fulfilled prophecy to track it. Jews and Christians believe in them because they were told to believe in them, and this type of faith is borne out of obedience. And I would suggest that faith borne out of obedience rather than knowledge is the stronger of the two. Having faith that a four way stop is beneficial to one's health comes easy when one can see lots of traffic at the intersection, as the connection between stopping and safety is obvious. It is not so easy to stop at the same intersection when one can see that there is no other traffic for over a quarter mile in all directions.

Speaking of laws, there are over 600 laws and commands in the Bible covering civil and religious directions that Jews were supposed to follow. It is true that many of them, especially the important ones, appear rational, and therefore seem to be a product of truth. This is something skeptics are quick to point out, as it suggests man came up with them instead of God. There is some truth to this, as Natural Law is recognized by the Catholic Church as being inherent in man's nature (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1954-1960). The Church believes Natural Law needs to be *guided* by Revealed Law, but Natural Law is nonetheless available to those who have never heard of Jehovah. It's the law Saint Paul claimed was "written in their hearts." (Romans 2:15, and prophesied in Jeremiah 31:33) Natural Law goes by other names as well, including Virtue Theory, universal morality, and even The Tao (as C.S. Lewis calls it, most notably in *The Abolition of Man*). And while universal law is favored by skeptical evolutionists as evidence that Jehovah is not needed, their theory is very lacking otherwise. We live in an age where man was obedient long enough that God finally granted us unprecedented amounts of understanding. It's easy to assume that things we know today were known by our ancestors. This is a fallacy known as *non sequitur* (does not follow). In truth, many Biblical commands and laws were contrary to the popular understanding of the time.

"Crop rotation," something that science was proud to tell farmers in the 18th century would keep farmlands from being exhausted, was actually directed by God to Moses approximately 3300 years earlier (Leviticus 25:1-7). The prohibition God gave to Moses in eating certain animals was likewise explained by science recently when a better understanding of diseases and how they spread

became available. Fish are safer to eat because the cell structure of fish is so alien to humans that any disease the fish had is unlikely able to affect human cells, whereas the cells of swine are so close to human cells that their diseases can easily adapt to humans. Skeptics also seem to forget that the biology of a cell was discovered by a Catholic monk (hence the term "cell," which was a reference to his sleeping quarters). God granted women the right to own land during the time of Moses (Numbers 27:1-11). Christian France became the first nation to formally outlaw slavery in 1315, and in the 1860's the United States, inspired by Christian groups such as the Quakers, lost approximately 620,000 men to decide the fate of slavery here. In the Bible, we see in the time of Moses that slaves were not only allowed their freedom after a period of time, but that the former owner needed to richly compensate the departing slave for his work (Deuteronomy 15:12-14)! While critics of Christianity will claim that Moses did not go far enough there, their very complaint is proof of how radical this law was at the time (they are implicitly stating that slavery was worse before the time of Moses). If we fast forward to the time of Saint Paul and his letter to Philemon, while not explicitly forbidding slavery, we see that Saint Paul was actually making the practice of slavery impossible if his suggestions were followed. It wasn't until the late 19th Century when Immanuel Kant finally formulated a secular way to claim that owing slaves was wrong, and that women ought to vote. And while Kant was not religious, he did believe in God, and most of his theories were very much hated by skeptics. While Kant showed that it was impossible to prove the existence of God, Kant also showed that the Christian churches were correct in all that they had been teaching on morality. But if one really wants to learn more about how radical Jewish and Christian morality is, I recommend Joy Davidman's book *Smoke on the Mountain*, as it does a fantastic job showing just how radical the Ten Commandments were in their day, and how they are being taken for granted today. But as for this paper, these examples were meant to show how much the Jews and Christians believed and acted out of obedience over the centuries and millennia before understanding was to be had.

But just because obedience must come before knowledge does not mean we only need obedience. It's not that God wants to keep us ignorant, it's that He wants us to grow! He made us to be like Him (Genesis 1:26). As *He* is all knowing, it ought to follow that we should at least be learning. Obedience is not meant to hold us back intellectually, but rather to ensure we can behave responsibly with the knowledge received. C.S. Lewis hypothesized that, had the first man and woman resisted the temptations of the serpent, then they would have shown themselves to be worthy of knowledge, and then be allowed to eat of the tree freely (beautifully shown in the allegory *Peralandra* from the *Silent Planet Trilogy*). Is he right? I think so, and for reasons I'll be getting to soon. But it doesn't really matter. What the Bible *does* tell us is that the first parents were *not* worthy. When asked what happened, both avoided responsibility for their actions, and blamed someone else (man blamed woman, and woman blamed the serpent). And the results of having knowledge without discipline are well documented in the Bible and in human history. Biblically, women's labor pains came to be (only human females seem to greatly suffer while in labor, and many animals do not seem to suffer at all), survival became a chore, murder came about, and all other types of depravity before and after the flood. This depravity has become fully manifested by man killing God twice (first Jesus in approximately 30 AD, and secondly in the so-called "Age of Enlightenment," as fully admitted by Friedrich Nietzsche in the late 19th Century: "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us?" *The Gay Science*). The last 100 years of our own time has shown a rapid increase of knowledge without obedience -- contraception first turned women into asexual (as in, "without gender") beings, then destroyed the family, and is now turning men into asexual beings and children into cute animals. We've had two world wars, and socialism has starved to death 120,000,000 of their own people in efforts to "improve" their lives (and this number does not count wars started by socialism, including World War II). The very real threat of

Mutual Assured Destruction (M.A.D.) with nuclear weapons is the only important example I can think of where man willingly turned to obedience and fully admitted where knowledge would take him otherwise. Man fulfilled God's promise that He would never destroy the world with a flood again, because now He no longer needs to. Man is not only perfectly capable of doing this all on his own should disobedience overcome his knowledge, but his options on how to commit global suicide is constantly growing.

But to get back to the point that perhaps, had man and woman resisted the serpent, God would have then allowed them to eat of the fruit. I think the answer is "yes," although I doubt we will ever know for certain in this life. What I can do is point to the simply immense amount of evidence found in the Bible.

The Jewish exodus provides many such examples. After serving as slaves for 400 years (Genesis 15:13), God took them in the desert and provided man with the Decalogue. As shown above, this was quite revolutionary for their time. The Jews had just demonstrated their obedience by fulfilling the commands of the Passover (and one has to wonder how many Egyptians became Jews that night as well, after seeing the power of God in the previous nine plagues and hearing of the final threat). Granted, this was an *imperfect* demonstration of obedience (they continued to grumble), yet it was still a *massive* demonstration of obedience. And they were rewarded with knowledge for doing so. We also see that they were promised to be a nation of priests (Exodus 19:6), which means they were to be leaders of the world. But this was contingent on their continued fidelity, and this fidelity was much stricter than what the rest of the world would have to experience. While this is not "knowledge" *per se*, it is nonetheless a promise of power. As we move through the oft quoted yet seldom read books of *Leviticus* and *Deuteronomy*, we see the aforementioned obedience they had to endure, but at the same time we also see the way opening up to a better understanding of the world and God's plan. The wisest man in the world, King Solomon, came after the imperfect yet obedient King David, and the wisdom books Solomon wrote are studied by atheist and believer alike. Most notably, *Ecclesiastes* prefigured Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* by about 2,800 years, and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* by about 2,900 years. But the other books Solomon wrote (*Proverbs* and *Wisdom*, the later of which is not in protestant books), as well as the book of *Sirac* (also not in protestant books, yet highly regarded by most protestant scholars despite their belief it is not "inspired"), all have man moving past mere obedience, and moving towards figuring out for oneself proper conduct. And this is not lost in the books of the prophets either, who often times condemn obedience not done in good faith. "For it is love I desire, not sacrifice" (*Hosea* 6:6) is an important one, but *Malachi* was perhaps the most explicit in damning obedience without reflection. And while Jesus had much to say to the pharisees about the burdens they were placing on the people, a careful examination of the Gospels shows that Jesus never once condemned the actual burdens, but rather the motivations and lack of understanding behind the enforcement. Mere obedience was no longer enough, one needed to understand the propose of the act.

Without wanting to provide a seemingly endless list of examples to prove this point, all I want to say is that Jesus' ministry also began with obedience, both for Himself at His baptism ("Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness," Matthew 4:15), as well as for His followers ("come after me, and I will make you fishers of men." Matthew 5:19). But as time went on, He tested the knowledge of his followers ("who do you say that I am?" Matthew 16:15, Mark 8:29, Luke 9:20), and he ended His ministry with the full revelation of Himself ("I am the way and the truth, and the life" John 14:6). When we see the teachings of Jesus in between these times and compare them to the Old Testament, we see often subtle, but always powerful, progressions from mere obedience to understanding.

The most important single event would be the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), and we can

compare it to the Decalogue. We see the transition from obedience to understanding just in the setting! The Decalogue came from God down the mountain to the people, the Sermon on the Mount had people coming up the mountain to God. Being told not to kill or commit adultery in the literal sense is fairly straightforward and requires little thought (obedience). But to include lustful thoughts as adultery (Matthew 5:27-30) and being angry as murder (Matthew 5:21-26) forces us to reflect on our own actions as opposed to simply having God telling us what to do. We have to use our minds to force our bodies to obey *us*, as opposed to merely having our bodies obey God. We have to learn to discipline ourselves to not feel lustful things when looking at members of the opposite sex. We have to avoid media (such as movies, TV shows and magazines) and places (such as gyms and beaches) where stimulation is too great for us to master. Self-imposed avoidance of sin will vary by individual, and can vary over time as an individual gains or loses control of one's feelings. We also have to discern for ourselves if anything we say about others is appropriate, need to know information, or would it be killing someone through gossip?

But let me return one more time to the idea of the people going up the mountain to see God. I think that, deep down inside, man actually knows whether he is ready or not for knowledge. He may bury this knowledge deep and let pride have its way (as did the first parents), but I believe it is still there for those who are humble. The people of Moses were invited to approach the mountain, but not to go beyond a certain point. The people actually kept a greater distance than required (Exodus 20:19-20). Despite all their faults with idolatry, ingratitude and other sins, the chosen people at Mount Sinai at least realized and feared what such a revelation would bring. Perhaps this self-mastery is what God saw in them that made them stand out from other peoples? In any case, 1,500 years of experiences, successes, losses, and prophecies, the obedient remnants of Israel were finally ready for the teachings God had to tell them, and this time they came to the top of the mountain where God was (Matthew 5:1).

Do you so love the truth and the right that you welcome, or at least submit willingly to, the idea of an exposure of what in you is yet unknown to yourself -- an exposure that may redound to the glory of the truth by making you ashamed and humble? ... Are you willing to be made glad that you were wrong when you thought others were wrong?
--George MacDonald, UNSPOKEN SERMONS, Third Series, *The Final Unmasking*

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