

Mind the Gap: First Principles and Popular Theology

Theologizing in the internet era is a tricky business. We can and must do better.

by Father John Cox

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Your Eminence, your Grace, Reverend Fathers, esteemed seminarians, brothers and sisters in Christ, I happen to know that Father John Parker, the dean of this institution, loves ice cream. In his honor, I have structured my talk accordingly. Did you ever eat an ice cream sundae? The kind with scoops of ice cream piled up, with whipped cream on top of that, and with a cherry on top of that? Imagine that someone came along and flicked the cherry off the top of your sundae. You might reasonably weigh the consequences of second-degree homicide against this shocking display of immorality. But if the offender begins to crow that by doing this they have destroyed your sundae you may conclude, with some justification, that they are simply insane. Much, perhaps most, of the theological discourse that takes place on the internet, what I am calling the popular level, is like this. I don't mean that it is always ill and ugly, though it often is. I mean that what gets all the attention is the whipped cream and cherry level of the sundae. This evening I want to describe three aspects of a problem related to the way we create and participate in theological discourse in the 21st century, and then I want to offer a model, drawing on the scholarship of Father Matthew Baker and Father George Florovsky, of discourse that I think will be more fruitful, especially as we move more deeply into the reality of a post-Christian world.

I would like to begin with a sort of case study that may help to put flesh on the bones of the first part of the problem that I am trying to describe. In the late 18th century Edward Gibbon published a six-volume history of the Roman Empire — covering hundreds of years using thousands of primary and secondary sources — in which he purports to describe the descent from noble antiquity into the “rubbish of the dark ages.” And this grand and complex historical narrative in which Christianity is at least largely responsible for the decline of the western world gets passed down through other books in other genres, through Adolf von Harnack and Conan Doyle, all the way down to 2020 and “some guy on Twitter.” As you can see, we have descended from a grand narrative to a cliché. Like a game of telephone, something of the original idea with which Gibbon began has made it successfully around the circle but a lot has got lost along the way. But what made it possible for the concept of the “dark ages” to retain some force of meaning, even though it got thinner and thinner as it moved through time, is that it simply diffused into the cultural fabric, the intellectual background, of the modern world. It became one of those things that everyone was sure had been proved and everyone knows is true, but in a rather vague sort of way.

To some extent, this kind of thing is inevitable. Whether they are true or not, ideas that gain sufficient ascendancy are simplified, reframed to be more accessible to a broader audience, and gradually absorbed into the general consciousness of a culture until they become like paisleys in the wallpaper. But between the adjective-laden screed of your garden variety keyboard warrior and the concept of dark ages developed by Gibbon, there is an ocean. This is the first part of our problem. As they get simplified and move through time, ideas become increasingly untethered from their sources, even if they get absorbed into the intellectual background of the culture. In this process they lose nuance and context. Sometimes they acquire new shades of meaning. Sometimes they actually acquire an opposite meaning. Recent events demonstrate that such shifts can be far from trivial.

In January 2019 the Ecumenical Patriarch wrote to Archbishop Anastasios of Albania justifying the reception of schismatic Ukrainian clergy into the Orthodox Church by fiat — that is, merely by the stroke of pen — without the laying on of hands, or even repentance. In this letter His All Holiness uses the Meletian schism, addressed by the First Ecumenical Council, as a precedent for his own actions. But contrary to the Patriarch’s assertion, the First Ecumenical Council did, in fact, call for the re-ordination of the schismatic Meletian clergy. How is it that His All Holiness got this backward? The answer is in his

use of sources. Rather than drawing on the primary sources relevant to the Meletian schism, the Ecumenical Patriarch, or his ghost writer, drew on the appendix to a 19th century pamphlet, published by then Metropolitan Basil of Anchialos, which, in turn, depends in large part, on a philological work published in Amsterdam in the 17th century, by the Calvinist, Johan Caspar Suicer — both of which make a hash of the primary source material. Secondary sources are not always so badly mistaken, but this illustrates how serious the ramifications of this untethering from primary sources can be. An entire schismatic group was restored to the Church and at least a significant part of the basis for doing so was established by means of mistaken and inadequate secondary sources. For Orthodox Christians who privilege tradition not just as a noun, but as a verb — the act of handing down the deposit of faith from one generation to the next — the connection between our theological convictions and their sources must be preserved and even strengthened where necessary. Such attention will help us to avoid vast errors like the one I just described but also the tendency to exalt mere custom to the vaults of eternal truth. On the local level this is perhaps the greater problem. I will never forget a discussion I observed in an online clergy group in which it came up, somehow, that clergy in the OCA take three sips from the chalice and those in the GOA take only one. There was a great deal of indignation all around, each side accusing the other of innovation, searching for historical evidence as a bulwark for their position, and generally being stuffy. The argument gradually lost momentum as it became apparent that neither side could claim that liturgical history was entirely on their side. But I digress.

The untethering of ideas from their sources and their subsequent misuse or misunderstanding, leads directly to the second part of the problem I am trying to describe for you this evening. The internet exacerbates this tendency because it is a space in which ideas are almost by definition simplified and unmoored from their anchorages. As I mentioned in the flyer advertising this talk, the five-page synopsis of the 500 page book that you read on your favorite site usually only describes the author's argument and focuses instead on the conclusions — the cherry on top of the sundae, if you will. The obvious consequence of this is that the casual reader has the impression that an argument has been made far more often than it actually has.

A great example of this is an article on the concept of nature, written by Father Vasileos Thermos and posted at Public Orthodoxy last year. In the article Father Vasileos sets out to advance a concept of nature based on the theology of Saint Maximus the Confessor. He contrasts his approach with that of

Thomas Aquinas and asserts that most Orthodox who make use of the “nature argument,” as he calls it, are indebted to Aquinas rather than to Orthodox sources, which prevents them from adopting a more authentic and constructive opinion vis a vis homosexual relations and gender dysphoria. Let’s look closely at his argument.

Father Vasileos begins by giving an example of the “nature argument” in the form of a link to an article by Dr. David Bradshaw, also published by Public Orthodoxy, and part of the same series as Fr. Vasileos’s article. In this article Dr. Bradshaw defends the importance of nature as a theological category and offers a very basic definition of what is meant by the expressions “according to” or “contrary to” nature:

The word that has traditionally been used to identify this integrity of bodily structure and function is nature. In particular, when an act is said in ancient sources to be “in accordance with nature” or “contrary to nature,” this is usually the sense that is intended.

As yet, we don’t have a very clear picture of what “the nature argument” is beyond that it includes the idea of something being according or contrary to nature. Father Vasileos assures us though – and before offering a more complete definition – that the nature argument comes from outside the Church and is often deployed to justify malicious behavior.

Having set the stage in this way, Father Vasileos finally gives us a fuller definition of the “nature argument:”

Contemporary moral objections to phenomena like homosexuality or gender dysphoria often rely on what we might call the “nature argument”: “this is unnatural,” “this is against nature,” and so on.

Further:

Aquinas, indeed, is widely regarded as the father of natural law theory, provided that “nature” is defined in scholastic terms as a fixed set of “forms” or “essences” underlying reality and generated by human reason. According to Aquinas, sin is considered a violation or undoing of this “nature” – to more or less detrimental effect...Aquinas’s view, therefore, is essentialist.

Having laid all this out Father Vasileos concludes this portion of his essay by saying that “Orthodox theology appears largely unaware that when it has recourse to the nature argument, it is playing the part of a loyal Thomist.”

I am sure most of you have already noticed that two things are missing in Father Vasileos' argument. First, he never defines the concepts that he says nature arguments are built on. If you want to know what natural law theory, forms or essences, or essentialism are you will have to look elsewhere. The second missing piece of the argument flows from this: Without some understanding of what those things are and how they work it is impossible to tell whether Orthodox theologians use those same concepts and, indeed, use them in the same way. All we are given by way of proof that Orthodox and Scholastic-Catholic nature arguments are identical is the shared use, exemplified in Dr. Bradshaw's article, of the expressions "according to" or "contrary to nature." If this is all that is necessary to establish the absolute parity of "nature arguments" I would like to propose that the stoic philosopher Seneca, and not Thomas Aquinas, is actually our intellectual father. Whether you believe Father Vasileos is correct that Orthodox nature arguments are identical to Thomistic ones, my point is that he hasn't actually supported his claim. On the question of "nature arguments" he only appears to have made a case.

The second half of Father Vasileos' article develops his alternative understanding of nature. One he says is rooted in the theology of St. Maximus the Confessor. In two short paragraphs he tells us that, for St. Maximus, nature is dynamic and eschatological — free from "preexisting forms" or "inherent structural teleology." He tells us this without once quoting, or even citing, any of the writings of St. Maximus, or any other source for that matter. The strength of his characterization of St. Maximus' theology depends entirely on your willingness to trust him. I am not suggesting any attempt at subterfuge on the part of Father Vasileos. I take it for granted that he is presenting what he genuinely believes to be St. Maximus' thought on the matter. But an argument that claims a historical source said "X" that does not show you how and where the source says it, or include primary or secondary citations, is simply an appeal to authority. Once again, nothing in Father Vasileos' argument has actually been demonstrated to his readers.

Perhaps, one might suggest, not all kinds of articles are intended to "prove" something. Sometimes a theologian might wish to simply sketch out a different way of thinking about a problem without all the bother of developing it thoroughly. At the end of the article, Father Vasileos himself suggests that his thoughts have the character of a provisional sketch, even as he urges his readers, once more, to embrace his understanding of St. Maximus.

But they aren't interpreted that way by Dr. Aristotle Papanikolaou. In a pair of articles published on the same theme, and shortly after, the one by Father Vasileos, Papanikolaou puts forward a theological approach to questions of sex that would, in theory, open the door to blessing same sex marriages in the Orthodox Church. In his second essay he briefly addresses the implied problem of how to reconcile his approach with the kinds of "nature arguments" Father Vasileos mentioned in his essay. His solution is elegant in its simplicity. He offloads the entire question onto the two articles, by Bradshaw and Thermos, that we have just reviewed. In other words, Dr. Papanikolaou links to Dr. Bradshaw's article in acknowledgement that nature is a relevant category of concern, and then he links to Fr. Vasileos' explanation of St. Maximus (which contains not one actual phrase from Maximus) as a sufficient answer to that concern. To all appearances, an argument has been made but, as we have seen already, this is an illusion.

If you're following along at home, what we have done so far is to describe two aspects of the problem of the gap between us and our sources in contemporary theological dialogue online. The first problem was that as ideas get simplified and/or move through time they tend to come untethered from their sources which often leads to those ideas being wrongly interpreted and applied. Following from that, the second part of the problem was that the internet, almost by definition, reduces everything to smaller and simpler parts. The building blocks of theological argument that conclusions are supposed to be built upon are usually only described or briefly summarized in order to get on to the conclusions, which is where the excitement is. On account of this, we often mistake the description of an argument for its actual demonstration, and thereby acquire the impression that much more has been proved than a careful reading can sustain.

The third part of the problem I would like to describe before turning to Fathers Matthew Baker and Georges Florovsky for guidance follows closely from the first two, and I imagine it has already occurred to you. If the theological discourse we engage in online tends to be fragmented and focused on conclusions to the detriment of building sound arguments we are wasting enormous amounts of time and energy discussing, debating, creating and rebutting content that has no lasting value. Now, far be it from me to suggest that anyone not waste time on the internet. By all means, meme away. What I want to call attention to is specifically the cheapening of the task and discipline of theology that develops when we participate in it unseriously. St. Gregory the Theologian reminds us that "discussion of theology is not for

everyone, I tell you, not for everyone - it is no such inexpensive or effortless pursuit. Nor, I would add, is it for every occasion or every audience..." (Oration 27). I call your attention to the words "inexpensive" and "effortless." I think we need to take this more to heart that we usually do. If we are doing it properly, the task of theology is difficult and costly. How so? Some are inclined to interpret these adjectives in an exclusively ascetic and mystical sense. That is, theology is difficult and costly in that it requires a difficult ascetic struggle in order to purify the heart and arrive at the inner experience of God. Those of a more academic bent might prefer to emphasize the hard work of the mind required to comprehend the deeper nuances and insights of doctrine. Neither has an exclusive claim on the truth. Whether in books, groups, or on the internet, theology, no matter how complex, is always oriented toward the revelation of the True God and the confession of the True Faith, according to St. Irenaeus in *On the Apostolic Preaching*.

How does that relate to what we are discussing? Allow me to explain by appearing to wander even farther afield. In his *Exact Exposition of the Faith*, St. John of Damascus highlights the tripartite nature of the human soul. The "reasoning" part of the soul, what is usually called the nous or heart in the East and the intellectual soul in the West is the throne of God in the human person and guides the powers of will and desire that belong to the lower soul. I like the word "intellect" here because it provides a very clear description of what the higher soul does. To intellect is to apprehend, or to grasp or take hold of something. For the baptized Christian, the intellectual soul takes hold of God who makes His home there, and by means of the illuminating grace of His presence governs the lower soul and the body, which, St. Maximus tells us in his 7th *Ambiguum*, enables the body also to participate in immortality:

Following, then, the holy Fathers, we all unanimously teach that our Lord Jesus Christ is to us One and the same Son, the Self-same Perfect in Godhead, the Self-same Perfect in Manhood; truly God and truly Man; the Self-same of a rational soul and body; co-essential with the Father according to the Godhead, the Self-same co-essential with us according to the Manhood; like us in all things, sin apart; before the ages begotten of the Father as to the Godhead, but in the last days, the Self-same, for us and for our salvation (born) of Mary the Virgin Theotokos as to the Manhood; One and the Same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten; acknowledged in Two Natures unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the difference of the Natures being in no way removed because of the Union, but rather the properties of each Nature being preserved, and (both) concurring into One Person and One Hypostasis; not as though He was parted or divided into Two

Persons, but One and the Self-same Son and Only-begotten God, Word, Lord, Jesus Christ; even as from the beginning the prophets have taught concerning Him, and as the Lord Jesus Christ Himself hath taught us, and as the Symbol of the Fathers hath handed down to us. (tr. Andrew Louth, Maximus the Confessor (Routledge, 1996).

St. Maximus' understanding here has an eschatological frame that points to the fulfillment of the human vocation, given first in Paradise in the book of Genesis, to be Lord over the creation and the means by which each thing participates in God. This task involves the experiential indwelling of Grace, as well as the rightly ordered mind that enables the naming of the animals. In other words, patristic anthropology affirms that the task of theology is an integrated task of the whole person. It should not be reduced to a matter of pure mind or pure experience, nor to a passive regurgitation of quotations, formulae, or liturgical texts. The Chalcedonian definition safeguards the absolute necessity of holding together what is within history, and therefore subject to rational inquiry, with what is beyond history and therefore beyond our ability to speak of. This wholistic approach must inform not only our understanding of what theology is but how we go about the theological task.

In the preceding remarks I have tried to describe some problematic aspects of the challenge of participating in theological discourse online. Ideas get separated from their sources, and often get misused or misunderstood. Because of the reductive nature of internet content we often think arguments have been made when they have only been described, and a consequence of this is that the task of theology is often conducted in a manner that is inconsistent with its value and the character of the Christian vocation.

Someone listening just this far might conclude that the best response to what I have said is simply not to do theology online. This is, in my opinion, far too low an estimation of our capabilities. We can — we must — do much better. In the time that remains to me I would like to propose a way of going about theology that I hope will be more fruitful and faithful.

As the title of the talk indicates, my solution to the problems of theology on the internet involves a return to first principles. This can be taken in any number of ways so I want to clarify what I am thinking of. For a Christian THE first principle of theology is the Holy Scriptures. This is clearly demonstrated for us in the story of Luke and Cleopas meeting Jesus on the road to Emmaus in the 24th chapter of Luke. As they are walking Jesus opens the scriptures and shows how they all speak about Him — his death and resurrection — and this is their

preparation for seeing him in the breaking of the bread. The proclamation of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus is a scriptural one. In his article, "Theology Reasons in History," which develops certain themes in the work of Father George Florovsky (and which I cannot recommend highly enough), the late Father Matthew Baker of blessed memory, shows us Father George homing in on the very scriptural way one of his own heroes, St. Philaret (Drozdo) goes about doing theology. Father Matthew writes, quoting liberally from Father George:

"As a theologian and a teacher," Philaret "was above all a Biblicist," and one with "a lively sense of history." Contrary to the method then commonly employed, Philaret did not consult Holy Scriptures for proofs: he proceeded from the sacred texts. In Bukharev's apt phrase, for Filaret Biblical texts "were the thoughts of the Living and All-Wise God emanating from his unknowableness for our understanding." His thoughts lived in the Biblical element. He pondered aloud while sifting the nuances of a Biblical story."

If we wish to be better theologians we must become, above all else, better students of the Holy Scriptures, not simply mining it for proof texts, but reading to know and understand. This begins simply with becoming more familiar with the contents of the Old and New Testaments. It isn't even especially important that we understand everything we are reading at first. Explanations are far easier to come by, and far less harmful, than a "Bible for Dummies" introduction to the text itself. Here an asceticism of the mind is necessary – not allowing our questions, speculations, or boredom to prevent us from knowing the scriptures.

Second, we must continually return to the foundational truths elaborated so powerfully in the dogmatic tradition of the Church. How many of us have actually read the texts of the Ecumenical Councils or more than snippets of St. Irenaeus or St. John of Damascus (who, by the way, is masterful in the simplicity of his expression)? Though these texts can be challenging they are not anywhere near as difficult to read as your average theology journal article written in our own language. Doing this helps to preserve the connections between us and our sources so that we as we apply them to our modern questions and problems we do so in a way that is faithful and successful as an act of traditioning the faith once delivered to the saints. I do not suggest that simply repeating dogmatic formulae is an adequate response to the problems of our day. But the only authentic way for us to arrive at those answers is

through a faithful and serious engagement with the theological reasoning of our Tradition.

This requires two further comments for the reader or writer of theology. First, we simply need to read more carefully. We have already seen what a little bit of careful reading can yield and this should become our habit to the degree of our ability. We cannot do this unless we learn to practice the asceticism of the mind I mentioned a moment ago. We must discipline the impulsive reactions of our thoughts as much as we do those of our body. We need to train ourselves in the art of reading to understand rather than reading to react. This may also require that we read more deeply. I am afraid that it may even require us to read books. Second, we need to give a much higher priority to the practice of exegesis. Returning to Father Matthew's article, we read:

[For Filaret] Theological reasoning finds its home in exegesis. Here Florovsky's passing comparison of Philaret's theology to that of Gregory of Nyssa is perhaps significant: in Gregory's terms, the theologian explicates the train of the Biblical narrative in its inner connections, disclosing through them the order of the divine economy itself. "Theology, according to Metropolitan Filaret, in its essence and its method should be a 'theology of interpretation', a coherent holistic disclosure of the doctrine of Divine Revelation."

I don't know that I can say it any better or more thoroughly than that.

In the course of my remarks this evening I have attempted to demonstrate that the way we do theology, particularly online, is susceptible to a series of related problems that hinder us in the task of understanding and articulating our faith theologically. The examples I chose were selected expressly to show that these problems don't belong just to the hoi polloi and their raucous internet forums. They occur at the highest levels of ecclesial and academic repute, which demonstrates their ubiquity. I have also pointed out what I think are the most valuable changes we can make in order to address and overcome these problems. I believe that becoming better students of the scriptures, with better reading habits, and a closer eye on our dogmatic tradition will help us to deepen our own understanding of Christianity and make us better stewards of it as we seek to live it and hand it down to our own children. In the historical journey of the Church we march through this age toward the kingdom of God and the age to come. There was never a time when this was not a difficult sojourn. But the proclamation of the Gospel has not ceased to bear fruit down to this very hour. Let it bear fruit also in us. Thank you very much.

Father John Cox is a Managing Editor of Rule of Faith.