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Mike Polioudakis

Not Fully Accurate (Inaccurate) Dogma and Practice

There is no particular point here. Some people have ideas and practices that I think are off the mark but not necessarily sinful. I want to think out what that means. This is a problem that every good priest has to deal with, and likely could explain much better than I do; but I don't have a priest here, and I am not sure they want this issue aired publicly.

If there is a point, it is: as long as people act well, and have some sense that God loves us, then that is about as much as I can reasonably ask. I can't ask for dogmatic perfection or perfection in acts. I can ask that they do no harm.

For example, most Christians likely are Aryans of some sort in that they believe Jesus is somehow less than the Father, or that the Father and Jesus are not identical and equal. Most Christians do not take much account of the Holy Spirit, and certainly do not hold the Holy Spirit equal to Jesus or the Father. Most people who revere and respect Mary actually worship her and so commit serious idolatry, even when they know better and have had official doctrine explained to them; "most people" includes both Christians and Muslims. Most Christians likely do not understand doctrines such as "substantiation", and most likely take wrong attitudes into the Eucharist. Most well-educated Christian priests likely hold several seriously wrong ideas about dogma. Many Jews give the Spirit short shrift.

So what? As long as people do no harm, then there is little point forcing people understand or make people perform acts correctly. There is a lot of potential harm in forcing people into correct dogma and practice.

The idea that people's souls depend on holding exactly perfect dogma and carrying out practice with total accuracy is no longer widespread, and the idea is certainly false. It only ever was useful as a tool for other ends, such as in the Inquisition.

I am sure that I don't know everything there is to know about God and Jesus that is important for acting well on Earth, let alone everything important.

On the other hand, how far off can people be before error becomes an issue? I don't go into details. We all know some cases. Think of militancy among any major religion to know that its doctrine – official and unofficial - can be twisted to support evil. We all know the dangers of legalism and terrorism.

If we let people wander around a lot in their beliefs and acts, we hold that many and diverse variations are acceptable, and hold that many variations “bring people to God” equally well, then fairly quickly we end up with a bad version of Hinduism. We end up in bad relativism.

I used to think people were more likely to wander into bad practices if they had inaccurate beliefs, and that accurate beliefs automatically led to better action. There is something to this, but not enough to worry much about. I know some people who know deeply that God loves them and know deeply they should try to love their neighbors but still act badly. I know people who hold silly beliefs about spirits and divination but still manage to act quite well.

Thinking that people need a lot of accuracy in their beliefs is really a way to excuse making them believe as we want them to believe, chiefly so that we can make them act as we want them to act. That tactic is worse than their original errant beliefs.

The worst aspect of inaccurate dogma and silly superstitious acts is that they keep people from thinking better and doing better. See below under “sayasaat”. When I see people praying without stop, praying with their hands out like bent antennas, lighting candles, sighing, haranguing students on a campus, chasing out devils, fingering beads like sugar cubes of LSD, fingering the rosary compulsively, mumbling prayers to Mary, etc. it makes me think of what they could have been doing instead. It makes me think of how they could have learned to relax and do something useful. They could have taken out all that nervous energy by working on a food bank or building houses for the poor. They need a good priest to tell them that straight out.

I don't want to minimize how true my assessment is but it is not true enough to justify my annoyance. Usually people who have small bad practices do little harm except to themselves. Many of these people need rote activities to calm down their nervous souls or channel nervous energy. After they calm down, they actually do some of the good that they could have done none of otherwise. Many of them could not change without first getting worse and risking a lot. Whether it is worth trying to lead them to change and get better, I leave to people closer to them.

My attitude reminds me of a gospel story in which a woman uses a bottle of expensive oil to anoint Jesus. A fellow follower of Jesus complains that, instead, the bottle might have been sold and money given to the poor. Jesus scolds the complainer. Jesus says the poor will always be with us but Jesus will soon depart, and the act was well done. The woman will be remembered forever, as she is. I am like the complainer; and I should know better. Not all acts have to be narrowly useful. Not all non-useful acts are a waste. If no harm is done, then usually it is best to leave alone. Sometimes harm is done by omission, as in this case, but even those cases are usually best left alone.

Misguided worship and other religious acts annoy me because they are like magic and superstition. Fingering a rosary is like leaving a cake for the fairies to eat. Sticking your hands out like antennas and babbling in pseudo-tongues is like dancing for the tree spirits who will bless your herd. Haranguing students on the steps of the Quad is like whipping the voodoo believers into frenzy. Lighting a candle is

like getting the priest to bless your lotto ticket. These days, thankfully, mostly magic does little harm except to believers. It does harm believers by keeping them from better thoughts and acts. The formal Thai word for magic is "sayasaat" from Pali-Sanskrit "saya shastra". "Sayasaat" means something like "practices-arts that put you to sleep". "Sleep" in this case is the opposite of "awakened" or enlightened. It means confused about how the world really is and what you should do. It is the sleep of a business person so immersed in success to make his-her family "better off" that he-she neglects his-her family and makes them fail. People immersed in magic, silly beliefs, and silly practices are asleep to the bigger better world and to the better things they could be doing. Even if magic works, it misdirects attention away from waking up and from doing what is more useful for you and the world. Because of that, and of how much they waste, misguided worship and other religious acts are quite annoying. It all borders on the indecent. This is the way many Protestants feel toward Roman Catholic devotional practices but it is also the way I feel toward many Protestant devotional practices as well. It is just annoying in the way magic and superstition are annoying, and you wish people would cut it out and do something better.

Another aspect of my attitude makes me need to be careful. I tend to associate people who do silly acts with people who do indecent acts. I tend to see a sidewalk preacher or someone fingering a rosary as I see somebody blasting loud pseudo-music crap out of a car and throwing beer bottles around. I feel the same moral indignation. Here is not the place to guess why I do this. The points are that my attitude is inaccurate, wrong, an error; and my attitude causes harm. My misjudgment causes harm both to other people and myself. My attitude is a case of the attitude that I dislike; my attitude is more indecent than the attitude of most people that I wrongly lump into the category of indecent. This kind of hypocrisy and projection is common but we overlook it in ourselves all the same. This fault in me does not mean all acts are decent, that there are no indecent acts but mine, and that I should overlook indecency. I can still get angry (mad) at indecency. I just have to make sure it is really indecency and not simply misguided hope, devotion, habit, and desperation.

Probably the best thing to do is to make sure "the truth is out there", act well yourself, and have some good people to use as examples of correct belief and correct acts. Be willing to explain if you are asked. Be able to explain. This is an obvious and well-worn stance but it is still the best.

What about when you see bad dogma or bad acts, or when you see bad acts using bad dogma, or when you see bad acts distorting good dogma to serve as an excuse? That is a long note in itself. We have to be willing and able to confront such situations without making them worse. I am not good at doing that and I have little advice for doing that well.

I do know that confronting ignorant people, or people behaving badly, with well-thought-out-tightly-knit-accurate-detailed-dogma rarely works. It usually makes the situation worse. Accurate dogma does not often lead people to act better although it certainly does so sometimes. Over the long run, we have little more than accurate dogma and good acts by which to change behavior. In the short run, we have to control bad behavior, and we have to provide examples of good behavior that really works. We have to make people believe they can get here from there.