

A Delicate Balance

As my former students and many of my readers and professional colleagues know, I am an Orthodox Christian, fully committed to Orthodoxy's doctrines and methods of prayer, as well as an author on the theology and spirituality of the Christian East.

It is also well known, however, that much of my teaching and writing was devoted to world religions—especially their mystical and contemplative streams, such as Sufism, Zen, and Vedanta—and to contemporary esoteric movements and figures. Many of my academic publications, a number of them available here on my website, were focused on the perennialist or traditionalist school of comparative religious thought and on the Swiss philosopher Frithjof Schuon. This was an area of professional expertise rooted in certain experiences and insights going back to my boyhood, but then developed along scholarly lines at the very start of my academic career.

This unusual combination of experiences, interests, commitments, and teaching responsibilities has often puzzled—and in some cases scandalized—both my professional colleagues, on the one hand, and my fellow Orthodox Christians, on the other. Needless to say, teaching and writing about religion and spiritual ideas in a secular state university requires caution and a certain diplomacy. When a teacher like me has a strong personal faith in one of those religions, and is philosophically opposed to the epistemological assumptions which dominate the contemporary academic environment, including the discipline of religious studies—in other words, when the teacher in question is *not* a materialist, a historicist, or a relativist!—he must therefore undertake a delicate balancing act.

I endeavored to strike a balance in the classroom by using a Socratic or dialogical pedagogy, even in my large lecture courses. This approach allowed me to honor the evident truths in other religious traditions as well as those in my own, but without being thought to promote them. In encouraging students to pose their own questions about assigned readings or things I may have said in my lectures, I was able to create a space in which to discuss my personal religious convictions, but in a non-personal and non-threatening way, drawing instead on the philosophical and theological insights of such Orthodox giants as Justin the Philosopher, Gregory the Theologian, and Maximos the Confessor.

In this way, too, I was able to move the discussion away from being a matter of *faith alone*—my own faith and commitments as an Orthodox Christian as distinct from the faith and commitments of some other religious believer—and to set forth instead Patristic *reasons* for being Orthodox and for believing that Christ, the divine Son and *Logos* of God, the I AM who was speaking to Moses on Sinai, is the fulness and source of all Truth, whether Christian or otherwise. In this way I hoped to be able to create a Christological bridge, as it were, between the teachings of the Orthodox Church and truths to be found in the *philosophia perennis*.

Now retired—and now facing death from a terminal illness, Stage IV cancer—I thought it was an appropriate moment to add this personal statement as an introduction to my public presence online, and to assure my fellow Orthodox Christians that the Truth which is Christ is the same Truth which served as the underlying foundation, though often implicit, for all my teaching and writing.

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