

REASON OR REVELATION?

Several years ago, Karen and I went on a guided tour of Peru called “Ancient Civilizations of Peru.” It was a fascinating experience. We learned that there were actually four successive civilizations which arose in ancient Peru. The first were a people called the Lambayeques, the second, the Mochi and the third, the Chima. The fourth were the Incas. The Incas built an empire that stretched from the western border of Columbia to the southern tip of Argentina and covered nearly 40% of South America. We traveled to a number of sites where we saw ruins and heard lectures about these ancient civilizations. What we learned was eye-opening, at least to me.

The Incas were intensely scientific. They developed sophisticated methods of farming, one of which was “terrace farming” which made it possible to grow crops on 35-degree mountain slopes. They practiced crop rotation to preserve soil fertility, bred multiple hybrids suited to various altitudes, and developed nutritious, high-protein grains. In some respects they were as advanced in their knowledge of agriculture and agronomy as we are today.

They were also expert architects. They built temples that withstood earthquakes better than the churches the Spaniards built centuries later. They built beautiful cities, the most famous of which is Machu Picchu—a city built on a mountaintop that looks like something out of Disneyland. Using interlocking stones cut to precise dimensions, they raised up structures that required no mortar. (The only famous structure in America I am aware of that uses this technique is the Washington Monument.) Archaeologists have uncovered sophisticated drainage systems and aqueducts for irrigation and human water consumption built into mountainous terrains as well as in desert and jungle areas.

This kind of knowledge and technology comes only from the systematic application of human intelligence to nature. There is a name for this: it is called science or the scientific method and it has produced marvelous things for mankind.

The religion of the Incas was also what a scientific mind might design. Like farmers today they were dependent upon the forces of nature for the health of their crops: rain, sun, wind, drought and so forth. They reasoned that these natural forces must be governed by beings who were “above nature” or “super-natural.” They called these supernatural beings “gods” or “spirits” and prayed to them enlist their help in controlling the forces of nature. They offered up sacrifices along with their prayers, hoping that these would please them. They would offer grain sacrifices and ask the rain god to send rain to end a drought. Or blood sacrifices to the war-god to give them victory in battle.

This kind of religion is called animism or nature-worship and it is the oldest form of religion known to man. In animistic religion, the goal is to control nature and supernatural beings are imagined to take the form of animals, mountains, stars and other elements of nature. There is a remarkable similarity between animistic religions all over the world. For example, there is always a “trinity” consisting of a bird, a land mammal and a reptile. (In the case of the Incas, it was the condor, the llama and a serpent.) Animism is the source of all pagan religion which is based upon the desire to earn the favor of supernatural powers by sacrificing things to them. It is not stupid or unintelligent religion—it is quite rational and far less mysterious than Christianity.

The problem is that the spirit of rationality which produces excellent science and technology produces bad religion because it is based on the false assumption that man has the resources and the ability to think as clearly about the Creator as he thinks about creation. One has only to contemplate the vast size and intricate order of the universe to realize that Whoever created it must be completely beyond the reach of human reason or imagination. When man tries to understand God he is like an ant trying to understand man. Reason—and the science it has produced—deals with what can be observed and measured and tested under controlled conditions. This, in a nutshell, is the scientific method. But God can neither be observed nor measured—let alone tested under controlled conditions. With all due respect to St. Thomas Aquinas, there is no “ladder of reason” which leads to an understanding of God. It is true that God’s existence is

revealed through the order of creation, as David says, *“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands...”* (Psalm 19:1) Or in Paul’s words, *“Since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made....”* (Romans 1:20) Creation requires a Creator because matter and energy do not come into existence by themselves. As C. S. Lewis said, *“We know there is a God because there is something rather than nothing.”* But that is as far as observation and reason will take us. From that point on, the only knowledge we can have of God is whatever God chooses to reveal to us. And so it is only through revelation and not reason that we can come to know God.

God gave us rational minds so that we would use them to care for His creation—not so that we would use them to understand Him. *“[He] took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.”* (Genesis 2:15) But when man tries to “reason his way to God” he will only come up with imaginary gods. The problem is that imaginary gods are capable of doing a great deal of harm. They are called idols and they have the power to enslave people’s minds and lead them to the worship of death. That’s why the monuments pagan religion has raised up to glorify itself are either tombs like the Taj Mahal and the Great Pyramids of Egypt, or temples of human sacrifice, like those of the Aztecs and Mayas. A contemporary pagan by the name of Osama Bin Laden said it perfectly when he said that the difference between Islam and Christianity was that, *“We love death more than you love life.”*

And he was right on at least one count: Christianity is a religion that worships life. The Bible, which reveals a religion designed by God rather than one devised by man, speaks not of gods or spirits that can be manipulated by sacrifices but of a God Who loves us and provides everything we need. Not a god who wants to barter with us but a God who wants to be our Father. A God who doesn’t wait for us to act first, but Who has already acted to solve the biggest problem we have, which is our sins which turn us away from Him and lead us worship death.

only find love in death. So can death be made to appear beautiful, just as Satan can appear to us as an angel of light.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says: *“Seek to enter by the narrow way, for wide is the gate and broad the way that lead to destruction and many there are who travel it. But small is the gate and narrow the way that leads to life, and few there are who find it.”*

I pray to God that all who hear or see these words seek to enter by the narrow way.

Amen