

THE VACUITY OF ORTHODOXIES

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During my growing up years, I often noticed that adults quite commonly lived by conventional wisdom, by orthodoxies of many kinds. My wonderful mother in particular was, to me, a prime example of this phenomenon, though my father was just the opposite. This trait of my mother caused me to move away from any notions which I may have had of discussing with her my emerging probe into conventional wisdoms of varying kinds. They seemed to me to be an easy excuse for avoiding the more difficult task of thinking things through for oneself and searching for a “real” understanding of the nature of existence and the reasons behind why the world is the way it is.

Orthodoxy is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “the quality or character of being ‘orthodox’”. Orthodox is defined as, “Holding right or correct opinions, i.e. such as are currently accepted as correct, or are in accordance with some recognized standard.” It always seemed to me, and still does, that we need to look beyond accepted principles and practices, to probe more deeply, and examine anew, long-held beliefs and ways of doing things. Such probing explorations seem to me to be absolutely necessary to moving forward in addressing in positive ways the challenges that lie before us all, as individuals, as communities and as nations.

Thus, as I read Herman Melville’s Moby Dick in an American Literature class in the third year of my Bachelor of Arts degree, it was to my delight that I discovered Melville’s brilliant chapter “The Funeral”. Here was a great mind capturing in exquisite allegory the very thought which I had so often had, the vacuity of orthodoxies, their insidious ability to obscure the truth and allow us to remain complacently captured by beliefs long outdated and not constructive for addressing the challenges of life. Discovering that Melville had been interested in the concept of orthodoxy and that he had captured it in gorgeously imaginative and eloquent allegorical prose was one of the great moments of my college career, affirming and reassuring.



Thus, from time to time, I return to this chapter and am refreshed, renewed and inspired by its exquisite imagery and its concise but profound demonstration of one of humankind's most lamentable foibles.

HERMAN MELVILLE

Moby Dick

THE FUNERAL

"Haul in the chains! Let the carcass go astern!" The vast tackles have now done their duty. The peeled white body of the beheaded whale flashes like a marble sepulchre; though changed in hue, it has not perceptibly lost anything in bulk. It is still colossal. slowly it floats more and more away, the water round it torn and splashed by the insatiate sharks, and the air above vexed with rapacious flights of screaming fowls, whose beaks are like so many insulting poniards in the whale. The vast white headless phantom floats further and further from the ship, and every rod that it so floats, what seem square roods of sharks and cubic roods of fowls, augment the murderous din. For hours and hours from the almost stationary ship that hideous sight is seen. Beneath the unclouded and mild azure sky, upon the fair face of the pleasant sea, wafted by the joyous breezes, that great mass of death floats on and on, till lost in infinite perspectives.

There's a most doleful and most mocking funeral! The sea-vultures all in pious mourning, the air-sharks all punctiliously in black or speckled. In life but few of them would have helped the whale, I ween, if peradventure he had needed it; but upon the banquet of his funeral they most piously do pounce. Oh, horrible vultureism of earth! from which not the mightiest whale is free.

Nor is this the end. Desecrated as the body is, a vengeful ghost survives and hovers over it to scare. Espied by some timid man-of-war or blundering discovery-vessel from afar, when the distance obscuring the swarming fowls, nevertheless still shows the white mass floating in the sun, and the white spray heaving high against it; straightway the whale's unharmed corpse, with trembling fingers is set down in the log—shoals, rocks, and breakers hereabouts: beware! And for years afterwards, perhaps, ships shun the place; leaping over it as silly sheep leap over a vacuum, because their leader originally leaped there when a stick was held. There's your law of precedents; there's your utility of traditions; there's the story of your obstinate survival of old beliefs never bottomed on the earth, and now not even hovering in the air! There's orthodoxy!

Thus, while in life the great whale's body may have been a real terror to his foes, in his death his ghost becomes a powerless panic to a world.

Are you a believer in ghosts, my friend? There are other ghosts than the Cock-Lane one, and far deeper men than Doctor Johnson who believe in them.