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# HOLY WATER AND PSEUDOSCIENCE: WHO NEEDS EXPERIMENTS ON HOLY THINGS?

*by Vladimir Gurbolikov*

Russian editor Vladimir Gurbolikov, from the Russian journal *FOMA: An Orthodox Magazine for Doubters*, offers an Orthodox response to the scientific “proofs” of religion and spirituality that have flooded print media and the internet over the past decade.

Not long ago, I became involved in a discussion about holy water. It began with an article published on an Orthodox internet site on the exploration of the physical and chemical properties of holy water. The publication did not pass unnoticed in worldly scientific circles, who laughed at what they saw as the Church’s “readiness to accept any false science that testifies in favor of Orthodoxy”.

I have long been interested in the topic of false science, and could not help commenting on the site. Such investigations are not only extremely doubtful from the point of view of science, but we Christians should be even more concerned about the motives of such investigations. Why do people do these experiments? And why should such things be published in Orthodox forums? The editor of the site responded by saying that though the facts described in the featured articles might be wrong, experiments like this are viewed positively by some high-ranking and well-educated clergy (he mentioned two such names). Such investigations, he says, “may be a new testimony to the truth of the Gospels and Orthodoxy in our age of doubt and lack of faith. “

Here I, a layman, should have kept silent, but I responded with a new comment, and whether due to this or to some other circumstance, the ill-fated article was removed from the site that very day. I don't want to name the site, as I wouldn't like to compromise a generally good Orthodox resource, but the problem seems important enough to discuss.

So the question is, whether it is acceptable to investigate things that are holy for Christians by means of traditional science? May holy water be subject to physical and chemical experiments in order to reveal its difference from ordinary water? If it may be done with water, then why may people not do it with myrrh from wonder-working icons, or incorrupt relics of saints? And finally, with Holy Communion?

In my opinion, such experiments are either conscious blasphemy, deeply masked disbelief, or more often, a serious misunderstanding of the very foundations of our faith.

The Church has sacraments and rites. In them we pray that God give us grace, and this grace in some mysterious way influences man through the physical matter over which sacred actions have been served. Does this mean that blessed matter must have different chemical and physical properties?

When we speak of physical and chemical properties of this or that substance or object we mean those properties that can be directly or indirectly studied by scientific means. The properties have to be reproducible and cannot depend on the personality of the investigator or on anyone's will. In other words, the properties are objective.

But there can be no objectivity when we are speaking about God's grace. We believe that there is grace in blessed matter, that is, God's direct action, His energy. But we cannot decide for God in what exact way His grace will reveal itself, if at all. There is no inevitability here, only God's freedom. He can heal someone who drinks holy water with faith and prayer, but instead of healing, He may send the person peace of mind and soul. Or He may choose not to manifest Himself externally in any way because, under the circumstances, this might not be good for the person.

If, however we think that blessing changes the properties of water and this blessing will, as inexorably as a machine, produce the desired effect, then we are pagans. This is the difference between magic and Christian consciousness: magic doesn't accept freedom. It proceeds from the assumption that matter and spirit can be manipulated to achieve the desired effect. Press a button, the lamp will switch on. Turn the left-hand handle, cold water flows;

turn the right handle, here is hot water. Or as an option, rub a lamp and an obedient genie will build you a palace.

Christianity is altogether different. God's grace is not an electric current. One can never be sure that God will do this or that. You may hope for it and pray for something, but God is free. And this freedom manifests in all of His actions.

So, let's return to the question: do the properties of water change after it has been blessed? Or should we conclude from our words about freedom that from the point of view of natural science holy water does not differ from ordinary water? That its optical density is *always* the same, that it *always* freezes at the same temperature, that the time it remains fresh is *always* the same as ordinary water?

Always seems to be the key word here; if we remove it, then we have some room for freedom. Although we don't know how God's grace acts in holy water, we have the right to assume that in some cases grace can manifest as changes in physical and chemical properties, but to predict when and for whom? This we cannot know.

So when a scientist takes a test-tube with holy water and studies it in his laboratory, what will his experiment show? Will it reveal any extraordinary properties? The answer is obvious: yes, it will, if God allows it. Perhaps, unknown to us, this scientist needs an impulse towards faith, and God sees that a difference in optical density may completely change his soul. But if this does happen, it will be an episode in those unique circumstances. By no means can we speak of this event as being reproducible, which is a criterion of scientific validity. God is not obliged to change the optical density in every separate vessel with holy water.

Such investigations are not theologically justified, and those experimenting on holy things are promoting a magical pagan world-view, whether intended or not.

Where does the opinion come from that such experiments can become a "new testimony to the truth of the Gospels and Orthodoxy in our time of doubt and shallow belief?" I will risk an answer – from materialism and a worship of science that are deeply ingrained in our souls. This is the result of decades of cultural stagnation, of a belief that if science confirms something, this 'something' is good and correct. In many people's minds, scientific approval still automatically raises the status of religion, and this is why so many believers have welcomed the slightest confirmation of every little

thing. People often want to rely on science, and for some Christians it doesn't really matter if the science is true or false, objective or shoddy, as long as it influences someone towards belief.

This is very sad and naïve because, first of all, Christianity does not need any scientific, artistic or political crutches. The Church does not deny these elements, but can easily do without them. Secondly, you cannot witness to the truth of the faith with the help of a lie, and what other word can we find for pseudoscientific experiments with a pseudo-religious interpretation? Real testimony to the faith lies in the real Christian life of people.

Finally, our age has long ceased to be an age of faithlessness and doubt. It has become an age of pseudo-religion and omnivorous spirituality. For us to fight against materialism would be like the British of the 1940's fighting against ghosts in their family castles. Her Majesty's subjects had a more frightful enemy at that time. ✦