

A Grander Scheme of Things?

In numerous articles on the homepage I've inserted a cautionary note. That is to say, much of the material has been done in a somewhat unprofessional manner. At the same time, this didn't preclude a desire to continue writing, chiefly out of the joy obtained from developing various insights. The primary aim is not just for personal benefit but coupled with the intent to share them with a wider audience. So with this caveat out of the way, all the material on this homepage is done with the theme of *lectio divina* in mind. The *lectio* approach allows for a broader expression and a certain liberty at not being constrained when approaching a given subject matter. Freedom from such constraint rests solely with the aim of making God as present as possible. However, this no excuse for cranking out lousy material. Such is the impetus which gave rise to this brief article as well as anything else on this homepage. The practice of *lectio divina* involves openness to the presence of God through a slow (and I mean s-l-o-w) process of reading. That, of course, is a continuous challenge. Should you give in, you feel the effect immediately.

Tied in with this acknowledgment of being un-professional, if you will, is my current reading of a book in German about Maximus the Confessor. Admittedly the two are a lethal combination: by no means is German easy to read, and Maximus in and by himself is difficult. Much scholarly material in German is quite dense and abstract¹. As for the book at hand, it's entitled **Gottes Sohn als Mensch** by Felix Heinzer. At the time of this writing I'm going through it for the third time, the last one having been about six years ago. Maximus wrote toward the end of the patristic period, and his ideas aren't as well known as other fathers. Indeed, they hold out so much promise for fostering a deeper understanding of our Christian heritage. Perhaps after this third reading (I wouldn't be surprised if another several are in store) I might be a tad closer to understanding him.

From what I gather, Heinzer is spelling out how Maximus develops the relationship of the Three Persons of the Trinity while tying it in with Christ as both divine and human. One part that grabbed by fancy is the biblical account of the origins of the human race starting off with Adam's divine origin. The Genesis account says that God himself formed him from the earth. Next comes his wife, Eve. She was formed from Adam's side. Later after the "fall" Adam gave birth to his son Abel (he doesn't mention Cain, the first murderer) which, of, course, is a human birth. Later the divine Word or *Logos* became flesh through the Virgin Mary, reversing the births just outlined: God becoming man. It counters man who had lost his being made in the divine image and likeness and thus restores it. This relationship between four comings-into-existence is rather neat. Perhaps if I don't garner anything further than this in this my third round of Heinzer's book it can be counted as a modest victory.

After having made a considerable amount of notations on the Hebrew and Greek texts designed to be put at the service of *lectio divina*, one overall insight began to take shape, albeit slowly. No doubt about it. We in the West have an incredibly rich spiritual and philosophical heritage. Nevertheless, there seems to be a kind of nagging, long-term deficiency plaguing us. Anyone with an interest in such matters, especially as applied to daily living, feels this deficiency one way or another. Actually it started some fifty years ago when some Western contemplative monks were

¹ Check out Mark Twain's observations in his book entitled **The Awful German Language**.

asking why all the sudden interest in Eastern religion while they weren't getting inquiries. Indeed, they were part of a tradition that certainly can hold its own, but so few people are aware of it. The reasons for such neglect are complex and beyond the scope of this essay. However, it can be summed up by saying that *lectio divina* and contemplative prayer often associated with it had been considered the preserve of cloistered religious, not laypersons. In other words, you had to be really special to access it. This mis-perception helped fill the need by giving rise to numerous devotional approaches which are fine in their own right. Nevertheless, many people are becoming more aware of the limitations of such practices and want something more but don't know where to look.

Just becoming aware of the huge treasure-chest at our disposal gives rise to a sentiment of gratitude, the starting point for all genuine insights. That means you've hit upon something good...very good...and use this sentiment to work out some kind of response. It's chief side effect is a profound sense of peace which puts you at ease, allowing a clearer vision of things instead of our usual muddled outlook. Thus gratitude turns out to be essential to see how the Western philosophical and religious tradition might tie in with that of the East. By East I mean insights garnered from both Hinduism and Buddhism which abound with words related to consciousness. Awareness seems to be a parallel word, so might as well throw that in and see where it goes. This and other related terms endow religious insights with a certain flexibility and ability to adapt which means less room for rigidity or dogmatism. Then there's the real bugaboo for many Westerners, especially Christians of a more conservative bent: emphasis upon the impersonal. Often it's put out there undiluted form which makes it largely misunderstood, leading to rejection and condemnation. At the same time it's viewed as an opportunity for evangelization which would turn out to be an unmitigated disaster.

Getting back to the overall gist of the *lectio* site and its contents, two general tendencies are worth noting¹. However, before this we can include an important third, the Syriac tradition which unfortunately hasn't been accessed much by us in the West. This is unfortunate and needs to be pursued another day. The reason? Geographically the area in which the Syriac language was born is smack in between the Greco-Latin West and the Hindu-Buddhist East, i.e., the Middle East. Its missionaries preferred to head East which means India all the way to China and perhaps Southeast Asia. Just as important, Syriac tradition is more poetic. Then Islam came along (a whole different story), but in long run appears destined to be a blip on the radar screen despite all the headlines we've been hearing in recent years.

As for the two overall approaches with regard to *lectio divina* pertaining to scripture and related essays, the first is the Hebrew verbal root system and the second is the use of prepositions in Greek. Obviously both are important in any biblical study. However, usually the academic approach is associated with them which can preclude a broader appeal. At the same time without

1 Some other texts on the site pertain to Plato and other non-Christian authors. The practice of *lectio divina* may be extended there though in a somewhat modified form. Modified insofar as those texts aren't part of the Christian tradition though worthy of careful study which may aid in leading to prayer. Also there are patristic sources traditionally more in line with *lectio*. The authors favored here are Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and Bernard of Clairvaux.

this scholarship we wouldn't have a more accurate rendering of the texts. This is important for *lectio divina* so that reading the texts in this spirit can have a firmer point of departure, spiritually speaking. It enables one's *lectio* better prepared to remain at the service for what we'd call contemplative prayer.

With this caveat in mind, let's take a look at the first of two approaches, the Hebrew verbal root system. On the surface, Hebrew is simple. Most verbs are trilateral, that is, comprising of three consonants. From them arises a multitude of nouns as well as varying forms of verbs. The lack of vowels (they were added later) makes not only for a kind of short-hand reading but one which broadens out the possible meanings and hence interpretations of a given text. Then you have the familiar yet somewhat exotic look of Hebrew. Right away it strikes you as other-worldly. The letters (again, consonants) appear to drip down from a horizontal line; at the bottom are the vowels.

Given this context, you can't just render the Hebrew text adequately into English or for that matter, any other language. While of course you can, translate the Bible, the result is more an approximation. That means you need to delve much deeper into the text, word by word, verbal root by verbal root. Actually "root" is a pretty good way to describe this process, for it's not unlike roots of trees and plants which are underground. They are invisible and comprise the very essence of what grows above ¹. Focusing upon this invisibility a bit further within the context of reading Hebrew à la *lectio divina*, we can take the visible consonants, rest in them and allow them to convey us beneath...beneath the text...where the roots have their home and hence their Source. Such is the capacity of Hebrew words as essentially mini-icons, icons parallel to the way Eastern Orthodoxy expresses religious images. When this is done on a consistent basis a pattern begins to emerge, one gets a more comprehensive view of the underground root system, as it were. While there are no actual biblical words to match our notion of consciousness or awareness, the rough outline described here attempts to balance this out.

Turning attention to Greek in which the New Testament was written (we may include the Septuagint as well), you can't really grasp the meaning of a text unless you pay close attention to prepositions. They are free standing, if you will, as well as prefixed to verbs and nouns, thereby conveying the meaning in many subtle ways. In this way we're able to get a more physical, almost visual appreciation of what's going on at a deeper level ². Texts on the *lectio* site relevant to New Testament books rest upon this approach, so all you have to do is pull one out and see for yourself. Prepositions allow the mind to move far more fluidly in and around, up and down a given word, phrase or verse that's unavailable in any translation. To sum this all up, the two basic approaches to *lectio divina* are the Hebrew verbal root system (downward, if you will) and the prepositional approach of the Greek allowing you to evoke a fuller picture of an assorted types of movements: up, down, beside and so forth. While the notion of awareness or consciousness is conspicuously absent from both, the result approximates what Eastern methods are doing out in the open, if you will. When using either one or both approaches in your *lectio*, automatically your

1 Another image would be an iceberg which largely is underwater and hence invisible, but that's a lifeless entity.

2 The same can apply to the **Dialogues** of Plato and other pre-Christian texts, some of which were used by the Church Fathers.

attention is slowed down, almost like applying breaks. If you were to ask a person afterwards what it was like, chances are the response will be put in awareness-like terms.

And so these two approaches put at the service of *lectio divina* are offered to balance off anything comparable from the East. If you take the time to examine texts carefully and lovingly, they offer a lot more than at first glance. The comparable approach in the East is more direct: take someone and say "Do this (sit and meditate) and you'll get that." It's a direct way of going about the matter and not dependent upon dogma or teaching. Obviously this will raise a red flag among some Westerners. One comparable approach in the West are Christ's words regarding the Eucharist, "Take and eat, for this is my body." However, these powerful words have been layered over by a lot of dogma and dependency upon the one empowered to say such words, namely, a priest. So you take and eat, then what? From a rather cold, clinical point of view, the results aren't impressive. This part of the Mass is called the *anamnesis* or calling to mind which is far richer in the ancient world than ours. *Anamnesis* is akin to realizing in an instant from where you've come and how that source impacts your behavior in the present.

Dependency upon orthodoxy or right teaching is important to maintain the Christian tradition. Part of the reason is in that right from the beginning heresies afflicted the church, all centered around how God could become a human being. The essence of them all is that such an event (i.e., the Incarnation) ultimately is impossible and needs to be compromised. Of course, that depends upon what one thinks about God and man: utter transcendence and extreme vulnerability. In other words, you couldn't have two opposites or extremes from each other. Obviously this is a fertile field for all sorts of speculation. First comes the dogma or right teaching followed by exceptions to it, the picking and choosing of heresies which is the fundamental meaning of this word.

This leads to the essence of this short article, the lack of terms pertinent to awareness or consciousness in the West as it applies to spirituality. One wonders what would have happened if Christianity were born in an environment where such terms were dominant. Would we have different forms of heresies or for the most part would they be avoided? Pure speculation, of course, but one can't help but wonder. Then again, a person of faith may argue that God made the choice to become man in a culture lacking such terminology. Let's say that's basically true. A lot of benefit came from it and changed humanity for the better despite what seems a lot to the contrary. Nevertheless, the overall religious scene seems to be reaching a stage not so much of dissolution as some would have it but is on the cusp of a transformation. Perhaps a lot of the confusion we're experiencing today is part of an impulse that will push Christianity toward the East...and hopefully there through the gate of the Syriac tradition standing between the Mediterranean and India as well as beyond. Just pure speculation or wishful thinking.

Traces of this contact can be seen in Thoreau and his contemporaries when texts from the East made their way West or to Europe and then on to America. You can feel the excitement shared among them yet at the same time isolation from the mainstream of culture and religion in which they had lived. The seeds planted then germinated and exploded later in the '60s when interest in things Eastern came to the fore. Basically that was a lot of fanfare but the difference between

religions of the West and those of the East remained so distinct one wondered if the two could meet. Nevertheless, contact developed after the Second Vatican Council years after which we're entered a period of entrenchment. However, that stage can be a sign of preparing to make the next move toward bridging the East-West gap.

The title of this very brief and inadequate presentation is put deliberately in terms of a question, **A Grand Scheme of Things?** To pose it as such implies that a negative response may be a correct one. Hopefully this isn't true despite the entrenchment going on right now in some quarters. Instead, the question ties in with how Christianity is developing, that being a transitional phase from the diaper stage to a more advanced form of maturity. This, of course, is pure speculation, but given the current odd blend of disinterest in religion coupled with a keen interest in spiritual practices, it may contain some truth. A desire to attend to this situation is behind many documents on the *lectio divina* homepage though, of course, it isn't explicit. While grounded in the West's religious and philosophical heritage, they're done in a spirit which hopefully elicits the notion of awareness or consciousness. In other words, the documents have some character of the injunction "Do this and you'll get that." If it works out his way, the work done isn't in vain.

At the same time when you're moving through the biblical texts, you hear a lot about the so-called "fallen" human condition. The way it's presented is through trite, easy to remember catch-words and phrases along with plenty of talk about God taking revenge on us humans. In his own manner Socrates proclaims this loudly but doesn't seem as loaded with a sense of guilt. Compare this with the East's idea that person is made whole and entire. The West's comparable insight rests in a person being made in God's image and likeness as taken from Genesis. When you look at the actual biblical references to the two, it amounts to a scant three Old Testament references, four from the New Testament and four from the Apocrypha ¹. With this in mind, it's amazing how such an idea caught hold of the West's theological and spiritual tradition. It must have grabbed people down the ages, being referred to many a time.

A common, practical way of implement this idea of image (though the term isn't used explicitly) is by the familiar "One day at a time" or "live in the present." Quite a few people profit immensely by such injunctions, though it isn't spelled out more than that. It's equivalent to the command "Do this and you'll get that." To describe this very appealing insight is difficult for Westerners and requires some elaboration. Of course, the main thing is carrying it out which as just noted, is done. Still, it needs to come more main stream and presented in a more appealing, straight-forward manner so it won't be left in the realm of trite sayings.

This is where the discussion on the Hebrew verbal root system and Greek prepositions comes into play, at least as outlined on this homepage. The million dollar question? Does this approach really work? When using the verb "work," that doesn't mean storming heaven's gates on our own power. Again, "Do this, and you'll get that." Instead, the examples given on this homepage are given with the intent to show that it's easier than commonly accepted to dispose oneself to this approach. Experience shows that by employing the two approaches ('method' may work but not sure) we find ourselves pleasantly swimming around a given text or better, in places where we don't expect

¹ Refer to **On the Biblical Idea of Image and Likeness** also on this homepage.

to gain new insights. Then perhaps more quickly and true to the respective traditions of the East we're lead to what can be described only as a suspension of our rational processes. Suddenly we realize that we don't have go anywhere nor do anything. "It" is present to us immediately. In fact, "it" has been there all along.

What we're coming to realize is that this suspension consists in an un-peeling of layers of ignorance, of our preference for partiality, that has been the culprit. Such is the goal to which we aspire whether we realize it or not. The problem with us Westerners is that having gotten glimpse of a situation too good to be true, we can't accept it. Something in our DNA says that we must engage in a struggle to get there. it's more pervasive than imagined. The very idea of not having to do this gives rise to feelings of guilt, that we're unworthy and all that. Thus the real nub of getting there (or realizing that already we're 'there') is the perception that we have to do something...anything...to achieve freedom from the monkey-like jostling of our minds.

So it seems this preference for the Hebrew verbal root system and use of Greek prepositions approximates a good a definition of transcendence we'll ever get. Surely there are other ways, but this approach is offered as a response to anything the East may throw at us relative to concepts related to awareness or consciousness. More precisely, both contribute to the act of watching which is common to both. At this juncture experts may want to throw in theological caveats, perfectly fine. Nevertheless, what's presented here consists of baby steps, of attempting to see where we might be heading in the next one to three hundred years.¹ As for watching common to both traditions, the best way to see if it's a viable option is to go out and try it or at least be disposed to it's possibility.

This modest essay concludes with again reference to the title which has a question mark. It's used deliberately in a context where exploratory feelers are put out concerning a vague though profound sense of deficiency experienced by many people. Hopefully the brief...very brief...remarks about the Hebrew and Greek approach to *lectio divina* can be an aide to make a transit to think of Western religious ideas in terms of awareness. This may not be putting it properly, but it may echo with anyone intent on doing *lectio*. The question mark in the title leaves open the possibility that somewhere down the line a connection may be made between Christianity and religions of the East. Although the essay is written with little first hand contact of, a real drawback, it didn't preclude a bit of experimentation as we have here. Far more mature minds will work out what's right and add to what's lacking.

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¹ Then there's the major issue of technology, of how advancements in that field will impinge upon all this. Unfortunately there's no time to discuss this matter which will become vitally important.