

The Case for Invisibility

At first glance, writing about something you can't see and just as important, can't share with someone else, seems delusional or to put it more bluntly, a waste of time. Anyone of us can step forward and say that an invisible thing exists, but proving it is another matter. Does this mean a person who maintains such a position is privy to information only in his possession? No one knows for sure. A lot of what he claims rides on his reputation, his track record. Most of us, however, would urge that he get a life and tune into reality. With this caveat in mind, the article at hand makes the claim that an invisible reality does exist. It requires proof not so much in the conventional sense but prefers to extend an invitation to go out and engage in a practice that disposes you to this reality. That's the nub right there. Everyone wants proof but getting it involves a whole shift in one's life style, no easy matter. What comes to mind is a *metanoia*, a change of heart not unlike a religious conversion. Then again, speaking about an all-embracing, immediate presence beyond our comprehension doesn't have to be put in negative terms which is totally beyond our ability to relate with it. To speak of this presence as a "person" doesn't quite make the grade. It's a too narrowly defined concept we need to shake but not in exchange for a vague impersonal blob out there superceding all that belongs to a human being and what we hold dear. Suggesting the limits of what it means to be a person is a delicate matter subject to misunderstanding. Therefore any talk about this has to be couched in careful language to avoid denigrating what it means to be a person.

The presence of a reality beyond our comprehension is acknowledged by cultures of all times yet today is harder to accept simply because our society is permeated with materialism, a fairly recent event in the history of humanity. Although such materialism is well documented, it may not be as rampant as presumed, given the widespread desire by so many people for something beyond the physical. Yet because the two are incompatible and are competing with each other, it can be difficult to retain one's balance, let alone sanity. Some try to adapt by picking and choosing from each side but often end up with a hybrid. This amounts to a form of gnosticism based on science and preconceived ideas about what may lay outside our comprehension, ideas which can be quite naïve. So despite the prevailing materialism which casts doubt upon the existence of any invisible realm, fascination with the unseen doesn't go away but hangs around in one form or another.

With this introductory background, let's see if anything favorable might be said of the invisible which, of course, means what we can't see. While sight is the faculty most of us rely upon, we have four others: touch, hearing and taste. Such are the portals through which we obtain information from the outside world. Our intellects filter all information entering through these portals after which we construct a world view enabling us to get around in the world and enjoy a stable relationship with it. Actually our highly prized intellect turns out to be the biggest obstacle of them all. Working on input streaming in from the outside, it throws up a constant barrage of information as to who we are and so forth. Many times all this doesn't slam together as well as we'd like. In fact, it never does. Still, we know that something,

somehow is lacking, because of a persistent dissatisfaction which gnaws at us unceasingly. We all have it and sometimes reflect upon it but rarely examine it in depth.

By no means are our faculties defective; rather, the information they process always falls short of our expectations. We can attempt to fulfill that dissatisfaction by pressing our faculties to the max, but it only results in tiring us out. So why is it that we come away unsatisfied? Hypothetically speaking, if everyone in the world were satisfied through the information provided by their senses and minds, people would be at peace both with themselves and with others. The major obstacle to this? We want more and more “stuff,” desire being the cause of all strife. Certainly not a new insight but one that sets the stage for another age-old question, what we covet the most. A lot of issues would continue crowd in upon us even if we attain the most desired state of life we could dream about. Always we would find a need to add such-and-such a thing and so forth *ad infinitum*. In other words, we're taken up with endless tweaking made all the more addictive because of electronic devices. Fun on one level but boring on another since tweaking leaves our distress unresolved.

If pressed for an answer, just about anyone would acknowledge that our happiness ultimately doesn't lay in visible things and intellectual achievements, even though the latter are prized more highly. We can't give an adequate answer as to why this is so but realize our attraction for happiness is insatiable. In fact, it's central to being human, a kind of built-in mechanism, despite allowing ourselves to be led here and then over there. Because this is a such an intimate part of ourselves, we lack an adequate road map for guidance. This puts us in the position of setting up idols, if you will. They will offer us guidance through highly charged images whose primary function is to offer compensations for our ill-defined experience. Idols (and it may come as a certain surprise) are not bad in themselves. They have a partial reality to which we give allegiance, and singling out this partiality is the trouble. Our goal, therefore, is to break free from this partiality and see it for what it truly is. Thus by no means does the word “idol” belong to ancient times or primitive peoples but is alive and well, more sophisticated than we may think.

Idolatry is almost always associated with religion because religion deals with worship, and we give obeisance to these partial realities because they satisfy. In other words, they deliver (or we think they have this capacity), and we feel obliged to return the favor. It might be better to say that the idols compensate our partiality and stop there. They can't go beyond themselves, not knowing how and when to surrender to a reality which is not partial but full. This creates a vague uneasiness; we know the symptoms but find it difficult to identify them. So we're confronted with a strange inclination to deny, deny and deny again the evidence before us, that something just might lay beyond what our senses perceive and our intellect can construct. A strange state of affairs which brings up The Most Important Question, what exactly is this supposed reality? All we know is we don't have it and are caught in the partial reality of idolatry. Thus our knowledge is partial. We feel hemmed in by the prospect of something being out there, all the while attempting to corral it, an impossible task. With time it dawns on

us that our approach had been wrong, that is, thinking some type of discipline is required to grasp this fulness. Then we discover that no ascetic practice is required. The best approach is to let go of our attachments...easier than first imagined...and see what happens from there. In actuality this is all that can be said.

What impels us to this course of action is an awareness that our senses are an obstacle to perceiving reality in all its fulness because even if they deliver all we want, we remain dissatisfied. Our minds are plagued by an unceasing restlessness, and who isn't unfamiliar with that. This irritation remains in the background 7-24. For example, consider the uncontrolled flow of our dreams when no watchman is present to keep in check the thoughts flooding into our minds. However, a sure-fire sign that this restlessness has been put to sleep instead of keeping us distracted is manifest through an overall sentiment of happiness coupled with gratitude. For example, if we fall asleep grateful, chances are we'll rise grateful. Sounds a bit ideal and tinged with sentimentality, as though we're side-stepping the issue with a broad sweep of the brush. It is very easy to prove by trying it for ourselves. The biggest obstacle to this enterprise is the simplicity involved. If the task were more complex, more people might be inclined to tune in because it appeals to their inherent complexity.

When looking within ourselves we see various forces at work. Some of them may not have caught our attention until a crisis had emerged which sent us scurrying for a resolution. Immediately this produces considerable mental and emotional energy. Dealing with this energy which hitherto remained un-manifested can consume every waking moment of our lives, and even if we do resolve the issues at hand, our efforts fail to satisfy. Always we want more, and what this more is remains unexamined. So there comes to the fore of our awareness the existence of a reality which is present...always had been present...but lies just beyond our comprehension. It's invisible not just to our eyes but to our senses and intellect, a prospect both humiliating and comforting. Humiliating in that we've bumped up against something greater than ourselves and comforting in that this greater "something" has our best interests at heart.

We we may subscribe to this but going out and preaching about it won't work. The alternative is to give witness. Instinctively we know from the start it's going to be a hard sell, especially to those closest to us, family and friends. So if they decide to toss us aside, we still have access to that innate happiness. Since we're dealing with an interplay between acceptance and rejection, one has to win out, a classic dualism. Satisfying one won't work, for the other will continue to exert itself. The alternative? To see both as essentially the same which touches upon a genuine form of transcendence. Often this happens when we've exhausted all our resources and have no place to go, no one to turn to. Such stumbling around is inevitable and perfectly okay. The aim is not to get mired down but to press on and acknowledge that invisible reality at discrete intervals, that it works unceasingly in our favor despite our ignorance of its continuous action. The details about knowing how all this works out will emerge by themselves. Our task is to stand down and not bother about the matter which is different than

adopting a spirit of resignation.

Talk about invisibility invariably leads to religion and therefore God, so let's take a look at Christianity while being keenly mindful of its Jewish roots. There we see plenty of interaction between what is invisible and what is visible, the latter being a broader category under which we may situate mankind. Invisibility is particularly noticeable in the Old Testament which is marked by a more direct, unmediated relationship with God. At the same time the text is flooded with references to divine beings (angels) who manifest themselves in various ways. Later with the New Testament the invisible becomes visible which lifts divine revelation to wholly different level. After Easter and into the Pauline epistles the revelation and immediate reflection upon it morphs in the sense of becoming more abstract. And being abstract doesn't mean "being more intellectual" and removed from reality but in the literal sense of drawing out...*ab-traho*... that is, drawing the spiritual from the material. While this sounds fine and certainly is valid, we get a sense that we're missing something about this process of refinement, that we don't have the vocabulary to deal with it as well as we should. More on this later.

The Judeo-Christian story begins with Genesis' account of the coming into existence of the created realm and God's continuous interaction with it culminating in the person of Jesus Christ and just as importantly, the church he has established. Of course, that church is the body of believers animated by the Holy Spirit. Thus from the opening verse of Genesis down to the present day we have one unbroken continuum. That's the outline, an approach familiar to many of us. Yet the richness of this tradition has been presented as a question-and-answer format which smacks of a scholastic approach. This may have been fine for earlier generations but is out of style now. Still, it hangs around and remains preferred in some circles. Outside such limited circles, this model doesn't have broader appeal because it appears as a self-contained world not accounting for that deep-down *eros* which drives each of us. Should this *eros* remain ignored, it doesn't go away but pops up in other places where we seek to satisfy it. We must unhook...gently leave behind...the preponderance of the question-and-answer approach and not forcefully evict it. Perhaps this has something to do with why many people abandon religion. It's an approach to theology hard to shake for some persons responsible for handing down the West's religious tradition, making them puzzled why people have made the so-called move from religion to spirituality.

The traditional question-and-answer approach is a genuine paradox. It contains an inbuilt resistance to transcendence while at the same time acknowledges the existence of God. Those who favor it tend to rely upon authority which either belongs to them or derives from tradition. We've become more aware of this paradox which yields a superficial knowledge of the contents of tradition as well as how it had been passed down (or at least perceived as such). It's a very durable model and stands the test of time but only until now when it is not so much being challenged but left behind. The question-and-answer approach is too simple and broad sweeping for a complex age. At the same time people are desirous to know the contents of

their Judeo-Christian heritage more than ever. One approach of capitalizing on this desire is to foster the sense of mystery, knowing how to introduce people to it and let them run on their own with it. Yet they must face the hurdle of various Bible translations of texts and delve into stories which are an odd combination of mercy and violence. On top of this we have the miracles of Jesus as well as his resurrection from the dead (which no one saw...the archetypal coverup). They may be good stories and form part of our collective Western heritage, but that's about all. To get a sense of people's attitude to all this, listen to a discussion on the radio where these matters are raised. Virtually all are in a question-and-answer format where most questions are superficial and quite immature. The same with regard to the answers. The other approach is to reduce the Bible to myths....perhaps inspiring though not worthy of in depth follow-up. And so the inquirer comes away not just perplexed by angry at those who've been delegated to hand on our common spiritual tradition. And those to whom this anger is directed are perplexed as to why they are the recipients of it.

To a modern reader, one theme that does *not* run throughout this Western heritage is that of awareness or consciousness. Several generations ago this wouldn't have caught anyone's attention but is more in the fore due to advances in science and greater access to traditions of the East. Although the received texts of Judeo-Christian heritage doesn't contain such vocabulary, a closer examination reveals it is not entirely absent. On the other hand, Eastern traditions speak of awareness and consciousness frequently while delving into their many subtle distinctions. To broach this subject is a bit hairy because one can infer that Judaism and Christianity are inferior due to their lack of such terminology. And that sets the stage for introducing a form of gnosticism. In this scenario meditation would be preferred over the practice of religion, engaging in deeper quests instead of being caught up in rules and regulations.

So this supposed "lack" of talk concerning awareness and consciousness can produce a strange hybrid, one which is neither fish nor fowl. Despite the pitfalls of bringing up the matter, it's an intriguing subject and requires further exploration. If there's to be any bridge between the religious traditions of West and East, it will not take someone like Thomas Aquinas (who introduced Aristotle into Christianity) but a whole team of people spread out over several generations. The matter is too complex for any individual. Indeed, this appears to be the next biggest step religion in the West, especially Catholic Christianity, is destined to take.

This challenge lying in the not distant future has familiar roots going back, for example, to the American Transcendentalists who took great interest in translated Hindu scriptures that became available in Europe. From then on until the present various contacts were made in person and by reading manuscripts, both with varying success. However, no concerted efforts were made to see if Western religion (i.e., Christianity) might be viewed in light of insights related to awareness. Coupled with new scientific developments, Christianity seemed even more irrelevant. Basic to any future endeavor, of course, is a long and detailed study of Sanskrit which will take up considerable time to digest properly. Perhaps the best hope for

exploration lies in monasteries where spirituality is a lived tradition and reflection upon respective texts is a priority, that is, with a minimum intrusion of electronic devices and media. Yet many Western communities are struggling just to maintain themselves due to dwindling numbers which means that the resources have dwindled considerably over the years. That have a chilling effect and either postpone the project or allow it to shift to another place. Regardless, the issue at hand is to get it done and done well.

One question at the heart of this enterprise is how can we better understand the role of God as a transcendent presence within our Christian heritage while disengaging ourselves from the question-and-answer model. Not only that, but how can we avoid slipping into the dualism of spirituality vs. religion and assume a stance where this question doesn't emerge, that it's irrelevant. Putting it like this is a bit awkward; better ways are out there, but we'll let it rest for now. To be sure, the idea of examining religion vis-à-vis awareness remains worth examining. It has to be done without reading new ideas, however appealing and relevant, into the original Jewish-Christian (biblical) texts. This issue is pertinent because it focuses upon the outdated question-and-answer model which turns off a lot of people. While they find the stories vivid and meaningful, if not entertaining, they don't buy into them because they have an air of unreality and as belonging to a bygone era. Those entrusted with expounding their meaning use the question-and-answer format which doubles the damage. The images and archetypes referred to are no longer compelling for our submission because they are too fanciful and removed from modern day life. And so you have people dismissing their religious heritage not so much out of anger but as children who wish to exchange their set of play things for something better. On the other hand, talk about consciousness could avoid this although it too has its pitfalls. It runs the risk of being so abstract that anyone can read what he wants and come up with his own religion.

So how can we integrate all this into our lives or at least take the first steps? It's a daunting task but at the same time a welcome challenge. First we have to realize that the images and traditions handed down by Western religion are done largely in translation although their essence remains the same. Let's take an example with regard to how the heritage of the Old Testament is preserved even today. When we think of actual contemporary Jews there can come to mind a bunch of bearded men sitting in a yeshiva vigorously discussing the Talmud or some sacred text (in Hebrew, of course). Upon entering you're struck by the argumentative intensity filling the air. It can't be labeled a discussion, religious meeting or prayer group yet in a way, the yeshiva includes all three. The atmosphere may seem foreign, even alien, to Christians, but we have here an appealing example applicable to those of us who are not Jews. Although Christianity is rooted in this tradition, for a number of reasons unfortunately it has forsaken the essence of this yeshiva model. Part of the atmosphere of a yeshiva is the lack of external adornment. Any hall will do because attention is more upon the texts brought there and the discussions they elicit. So it may be worth our while to ponder these images of Jews in a yeshiva and let it ride a bit to see if they impact us favorably. The yeshiva model is much more than a question-and-answer format. It encourages, even demands, active participation

where people have something which smacks of the divine and into which they can sink their teeth. You'd never benefit should you wish to be an onlooker.

The reason for bringing up a yeshiva is that it's a model existing here-and-now which people may latch onto readily. It invites everyone and excludes no one who wishes to participate and pour over sacred texts, preferably in the Hebrew language. Even though this image may be helpful, it goes only so far like every other image when it comes to things traditionally related to divine reality. A yeshiva combines three features normally associated with religion as noted above—discussion, religious service and prayer—yet cannot be localized easily as in Catholicism, for example, with its sacred images. Of course, we have paintings, photos and videos of people in a yeshiva, but despite seeing the participants and being inspired by them, they can't be molded into a representation which translates into an object of devotion. If you wish to be inspired, you have to actively participate in a yeshiva, not look in. So the tendency to make visible an object of devotion is short-circuited, deliberately so, but not in a way to thwart people inclined to things devotional. Instead, it lifts one onto a plane where visible images assume a secondary role. They are exchanged for verbal ones, hence the emphasis upon one-on-one exchange normally as associated with the yeshiva example. Actually neither a yeshiva nor anything else turns out to be an full expression of the invisible. Nevertheless, the inability to grab onto something within the context of an argumentative environment is an experience which is very immediate and involves a lot of listening. That, in turn, involves close, sustained attention. And so right from the beginning a yeshiva is an example of the audible caught in the act, if you will, of moving in the direction towards that which is invisible while at home in the visible world.

Through this shift from the visible to the audible--but audible as participatory--we prime ourselves to be receptive to a reality not familiar to us. All major religions are characterized by this, the chief means of transmitting the bulk of their stories and doctrine. Visual representations follow later, if you will, and are secondary despite the importance of religious art such as icons. A brief observation, if you will...icons have a two dimensional, other-worldly air about them. Perhaps this enables them to tie in more easily with the basic auditory nature of liturgy compared with statues and other forms of religious art.

So if we turn attention to the audible, we stand a better chance of being more aware of what is intangible, and this intangibility is not ephemeral but endowed with existence. It isn't an illusion nor something cooked up. In fact, we're more inclined to incorporate information that has been handed over to us orally...by the mouth...which impinges upon our ears compared with that which comes at us visually. More physicality is involved, if you will, the atmosphere being filled with airwaves. We know they are present yet cannot see them, so their invisibility doesn't mean they don't exist. Instruments are required to detect them just as with any light waves coming at us.

The opening words of Genesis attributes the existence of creation to the spoken word: “and

God said.” As a result, various beings arise, parading into existence one after another. The speaking responsible for this creating doesn't stop here but continues throughout the Bible when God communicates with prophets and an assorted lot of men and women right down to the Word (*Logos*) of God, Jesus Christ himself. Even there it doesn't stop. The “good news” is transmitted orally meaning that people receive the new revelation not through sight but by word of mouth which, of course, means listening to it. With this in mind, miracles are recorded. But being visual, always they take a back seat to the oral transmission of the teaching at hand. Thus from the beginning to the end of divine revelation we find example after example of oral communication, including the Book of Revelation. Towards the end of this book it reads “I warn everyone who *hears* the *words* of the prophecy of this book” [22.18]. Being aware of the fact that Judeo-Christian revelation spread through hearing takes on an added uniqueness in age of visualization because it helps wean us from reliance on the sense of sight. Actually the word “revelation” itself leans more towards visualization although the Greek *apokalupsis* means an uncovering. However, this uncovering or the removal of a cover is more akin to the unblocking of deaf ears, not something physical under a tarp or the like.

When dealing with verbs related to speaking as, for example, to a prophet, the constructive *koh* is used and usually translates as “thus” but also can mean “like this” or “in this manner.” Virtually all prophetic utterances begin this way which has the purpose first of grabbing one's attention and then directing it to where the Lord wants, first to himself and then to the essence of the communication. *Koh* is not unlike the Lord saying, “Hey, pay attention to what I am about to say!” In a situation like this when we listen closely to a person speaking, we're so focused that our other senses, especially that of sight, are held in abeyance. The hearing seems to come at us from all sides...behind and above, if you will...which perhaps is why traditionally this communication is perceived as coming from heaven above where God dwells. We may be tempted to look back or above, but that doesn't work. When we do, in a sense we become the futility to which we had just now aspired, having been turned into pillars of salt just like the wife of Lot when she looks back.

Rediscovery of the sense of hearing in an era dominated by visual impact is close to miraculous, as though a totally different outlook on life had opened before us. But as we've seen, it has deep roots without our Western religious heritage, so what we're doing isn't anything new. Only the context is new. Nevertheless, there remains the problem of latching onto the content of what we hear and wanting to fix it in place. This is more illusory than it sounds because in our weakness and ignorance we think we can possess that which can't be possessed, like trying to bottle up the wind. All we're left with are memories which, like currency, must be backed up by a valuable commodity like gold, else they are valueless. That's when we discover that the inadequacy of old question-and-answer scenario is a poor substitute.

But a difficulty emerges because of our heavy reliance upon the sense of sight which seems more reliable than the other senses perhaps because of its immediacy and vividness. Putting it a bit simply, all we have to do is open our eyes and look at what's in front of us. Yet seldom do

we reflect upon the fact that we're passive to what we behold and remain that way even when input from other senses inform us. Reliance upon the sense of sight is intensified, if you will, by our growing dependence upon technical devices which substitute "real" reality in favor of reality which is "virtual." Such reliance begins with enticing us and then captivating us until our free will dribbles away, all with our passive consent and without barely noticing what had happened. The visual impressions that keep flowing our way are so strong and constant that we're powerless before them. Such is the reason why we feel uneasy in their presence despite the tantalizing parade of images. Yet this doesn't seem to bother a lot of people whose eyes remain fixated upon LCD screens of one type or another. We have no need to delve into this matter because it's well documented; sufficient to mention the problem and let it go at that. It's quite another thing when it comes to hearing. Similar to our faculty of sight, we hear everything around us. Supposedly it's the last sense we experience upon our deathbeds. We don't pay undo attention to the barrage of sounds else we'd be overwhelmed except when a sound endowed with meaning impinges directly upon our lives. Because sounds are more diffuse (many fall under the category of noise and static), a more focused attention is required to sort them out; to take in such diffusion is more tiresome than looking at a multitude of objects parading before us in our passivity.

Why is this so? First of all, consider one sound that strikes us as standing out from among the background of noise. When this occurs, sight remains active even though our attention isn't there. In this circumstance an object that normally would grab our attention wouldn't register. It's as though we've gone blind momentarily, not an uncommon experience as when we're focused upon a song. To others we appear to be daydreaming or absorbed in our own little world. However, our attention is focused upon a particular sound, filtering it out from among others, a task which takes up more energy than opening our eyes and letting all the sights fill our attention. Anyone who has had this experience of being captivated by a song considers it sublime, something not experienced in the everyday world, and is held more precious than anything we behold. Perhaps something similar happened to those who had encountered angels as recorded in the Bible. Their attention was so fully absorbed that they could neither see nor hear anything other than the communication being given.

Hearing involves a clear perception of a rise and then a fall of a given sound (and sound can mean voice as well). It comes into existence, hangs around a short time, and is succeeded by another—all transpiring incessantly—a characteristic not as prominent with the other senses. Actually when we hit upon a sound, it's more akin to being in its presence as though it were a living being. The experience is difficult to pin down and sometimes make us wonder if it actually exists, so fleeting is its nature, again, just like the appearance of an angel. Obviously it's real, but you can't help but question the experience. The words of Jesus are applicable here: "The wind blows where it wills, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes or tow where it goes" [Jn 3.8].

These common observations are brought to mind in order to wean ourselves from undue

reliance upon the sense of sight, a task made all the more difficult due to our dependence upon technology. If we stay with the experience of sound and therefore hearing, the faculty that picks up sound, we appreciate that despite being invisible, sound is among the most precious treasures everyone enjoys. Probably the reason is that sound bridges the gap between source and receiver and is more subtle than sight, for an object always stays out there at a distance. Because of the unity produced by sound, we can take it one step further. After striking our ears, sound become incorporated within our physical nature thereby mysteriously making the invisibility of sound visible, if you will. This important point lays at the heart of where the theme of this essay is going, namely, that sound contributes to making a case for the existence of invisible reality. Once this fact is established we can use it as a basis for re-considering our Western religious heritage and see if it can be a source of renewal or more precisely, new insights into texts proper to this heritage.

This relationship between sound and our physicality allows us to step into a realm which lacks adequate descriptive vocabulary because we've left behind the sphere of form for one of formlessness. It's not unlike a distillation process where the essence of a thing isn't destroyed but rarefied. However, this isn't a rarefication in the sense of losing the sound's identity but of gaining a purer rendition of it. Such is the hope held out before us as well as the difficulty in understanding what's involved in the process. Some of this difficulty may be attributed to our inability to think in terms of awareness, preferring instead to stick with the familiar patterns of form. The reasons for this are many, not the exact purpose of this essay, but at least it's helpful to be aware of as we make our way along the path of simplification from our inherent complexity.

Indeed, this is a journey which involves long years of prayer and *lectio divina*. We may have begun with a certain devotional attitude ('fervor' is a common adjective to describe early stage), have gone through some prolonged dryness and came out the other end but with the clear awareness that further advancement lies in store. In other words, we have listened to the sound of the texts, the essence or *logos* of what they contain, got excited about them and gobbled up more over the ensuing years, having gained deeper insights. Then after remaining on a plateau of sorts we realize more is up ahead yet are relatively clueless as how to incorporate it or in some cases, not knowing what this "more" consists of, just a sense that it is present. In the meantime we continue hearing about our religious heritage and how people are grappling with it. The questions they pose come from a sincere but often naïve heart. A classic example pertains to the seven days of creation in Genesis vis-à-vis modern advancements in science (which has a field day here, of course). And so it goes, back and forth, without resolution except that science and philosophy delight in debunking the religious perspective. As Ken Wiber would say,¹ the "eye" of science is not looking on the same level as the "eye" of spirituality. For the two to have meaningful dialogue, both eyes must be on the same level playing field which is what he means by seeing eye-to-eye.

1 Eye to Eye: The Quest for the New Paradigm (Boston, 1990)

While this desire for a more level playing field is important...much more could be said but that would be straying from the subject at hand...it reveals a painful truth about how spiritual practice based upon the tenets of religion is perceived and implemented, namely, the familiar question-and-answer format. It may not be as blatant as that, but the structure remains the same. In light of science (which includes psychology, sociology and all the rest), spirituality comes up far short. The imbalance between the two “eyes” is so off kilter that it is the butt of jokes from scientifically minded folks. It doesn't have to be so. The spiritual eye can interact with any other eye out there, even proving itself superior in the sense of belonging to a loftier plane which gradually becomes self-evident. Yet resistance to accepting this superiority runs so deep that no dialogue is possible. There automatically comes to mind the idea of hierarchy with all its current negative connotations. It turns out that this word is perfectly valid when understood as an *arche* (beginning) which is *hieros* (holy)..a holy beginning.

Next the temptation arises to say, yes the spiritual is analogous to the familiar sub-atomic realm, so let's build upon this similarity, an apparent seeing eye-to-eye but turns out to be an imitation of it. The “problem” with all eyes other than the spiritual one (this term is used frequently and hopefully not in a loose, umbrella-like sense) is that they consist of form, even the sub-atomic one. And that form always involves matter. The spiritual practice undertaken in *lectio divina* is one which, somewhat grossly put, aims to see the formless by means of the form, another word for the sacred text. Recourse to Plato comes to mind with the form (*eidōs*) as representing an idea and therefore inferior to it. That sounds okay and has been taken as such for generations. However, these subsequent generations had their own spin-offs which strayed from the original sense ending upon in a parody where the physical object (even the tradition) becomes a copy of the original, lacking many of its features. True to a certain extent, but it's been implemented to the nth degree resulting in a kind of hyper-dualism which affects us today despite our railing against it. Such is the perfect set-up where the spiritual eye cannot see...deal with...the scientific eye and visa versa.

So if something within us continues to claim the existence of an un-perceived, invisible reality despite our efforts to dispel it, further examination certainly is required as to why this is so. It appears immune or indifferent to our mental and emotional conditioning no matter how weak or strong. During the course of a given day we may attempt to shake awareness of this reality but can't help but bump up against it when we come home at night and find ourselves alone in our rooms. In fact, no one can't avoid this ultimate confrontation although it can be put off, a kind of “you can run but you can't hide” syndrome. One way to describe this particular solitary confinement waiting for us at the end of the day is by a peculiar feeling of being watched...not intrusively but by something or someone omni-present and best of all, non-judgmental. Ignorance of the true nature of things lays behind our desire to escape this confrontation, but in reality doesn't have to apply.

Admittedly it takes some doing to get to the point of being aware of an invisible companion (not exactly an ideal word, but we'll leave it at that). No dragging or coaxing is required;

instead it drops in on us unexpected pretty much as a gift. Even if it comes freely, we have to overcome an innate resistance which involves not so much a wearisome, ascetical task but one where we allow our residual resistance to dissipate over time. Because we're dealing with something quite extraordinary we can't help but think in terms of adopting a fairly severe discipline to conform ourselves to it. In other words, I will take up such-and-such a practice (physical, mental or spiritual) which will dispose me accordingly and once achieved, I will maintain it by continued discipline. Here we have all the ingredients of falling into the trap of mental concentration, certainly not our goal. Our desire to achieve such-and-such a result consists in entertaining some type of mental form, a memory from past experience (even it existed just a minute ago) and shifting it elsewhere. Since all memories are composed of images and therefore belong to the realm of form and by extension to visibility, an improper understanding of this shift places the memories in another form, albeit one which is more subtle. And so we end up with more of the same (i.e., form). So patience is required because we're so accustomed to forms...have never questioned the existence of an alternative...which may in some way or other tie into addiction.

Our primordial attachment to form presents a whole prepackage of "stuff" which first we have to lay our hands on and then evaluate in order to effect a transition from form to formlessness. Quite contrary to our expectations of heroic exertion, we get on the right path by fumbling repeatedly in our attempts until we give up. This is a metaphysical distress and exhaustion not belonging to the conventional order because it's so pervasive. The pain is understandable, given our almost complete reliance upon form which usually means visible reality. It's like pulling away from that which is most dear to us. Keen awareness of our attachment to form may spur us to experiment how the overall notion of form ties in with other senses, hearing, for example, which means sound. As for the other three—smell, taste and touch—unfortunately we don't take these very much into consideration. Possibly it's because they're not visible and are considered more primitive...sensual...and hence are to be minimized. Nevertheless, they offer valuable information as to the transitory nature of our each and every one of our perceptions and contribute to enhancing that unique feeling of being watched already mentioned.

As for the uncanny feeling of being observed, as soon as we attempt to grasp what or who is doing the watching, it escapes us like water running through our fingers. All the senses are operative, of course, yet to pick up this watching-ness we require a mode of perception which reaches beyond them. The same can be said with the intellect. In this special instance it too falls under the category of the senses which is a bit unnerving for anyone who prizes its vital role as navigator through the world of forms. By becoming aware of the intellect's limits we move into a fuller abandonment or receptivity of being watched. It's an exchange that carries a high price tag but once we give our consent, we wonder why we've delayed so long. At the same time never do we abandon the senses and intellect, a mistaken idea coming from an uninformed appreciation of their inherent value. They enable us to get around in the world and to deal with people but just don't satisfy on a deep level. We're left with a dissatisfaction

that is a red flag if there ever was one. Unfortunately this isn't discussed much despite the frustrations we all encounter. In other words, the senses and intellect, plus what they garner for us fall under the category of forms or visibility, a simple but important truth to keep in the forefront of our minds.

Usually religious literature is at its best expressing the limitations of our natural abilities yet the mode through which it's done can be awkward or outmoded. However, this is not the case if you have access to the original languages which defy manipulation as is the case today (word processing...the processing of words). One of the chief limitations is the way in which religious ideas are conveyed, that is, coming off as quaint and sometimes as immature, an ideal topic of study concerning primitive peoples and their culture. The struggle between orthodox Christianity and gnosticism ties in here in that specialized knowledge is supposed to purify the former of grosser elements which appeal to the masses. Back and forth over the centuries went the two sides, never finding an adequate resolution. However, gnosticism *per se* isn't of concern here. Like orthodox Christianity, it...and this can be misunderstood easily...remains in realm of form, not formlessness. So the two are battling it within the realm of form and never are able to reach a conclusion. Keeping with the theme of this essay, we could describe the problem (of which gnosticism is just one part) as favoring visibility over invisibility and adding all sorts of dogmatic baggage to it. Here, of course visibility = form and invisibility = formlessness.

So it appears that when we seek to understand religious insights...and that means we're dealing with texts some two thousand plus years old...a conflict is bound to arise. Apart from the obvious temporal and cultural gap between then and now is our primordial hang-up with form or keeping in line with the title of this essay, our hang-up with visibility. In practice this amounts to bringing over the forms of past religious expressions into those we use today. It's a jarring experience, very much so, and doesn't have to be this way. Putting it a bit differently, we're attempting to insert an ancient form into a new one. Because they don't fit, we lose the essence of the communication. The loss is aggravated unnecessarily in that we fail to see the real issue at hand, namely, our inability to transcend form, the purpose for which the original text had been written. Of course, we won't find this intent in the ancient writings and to persist in a search for it is flirting with a kind of gnosticism. Yet this seems to be the goal of the ancient texts. A good way as any to test this out is by engaging in the practice of *lectio divina*, the slow, meditative reading of scripture. That won't be touched upon here since it's discussed elsewhere on this home page. However, *lectio* done in a reverent manner each day seems to back up this point of view.

Should we examine our religious tradition with prayerful attention, one saving insight, if you will, stands out. That consists in the well known idea of the *Logos* as applied to the person of Jesus Christ. However, it means more than word, involving utterance and expression. A word...any word...has the advantage of not belonging to the visible realm but to the one of hearing which means it exists elsewhere. And this existence is quite tenuous, for it fades away

as soon as it is uttered. Yet a word remains in the hearer as a memory which can be visualized at leisure, a familiar experience when we recall it and attach images. Such is a way of awakening the mind without fixing it upon a particular object. After all the *logos* is part of the *Logos*. As for the *Logos*, it's saved from being reduced into gnosticism through a process of abstraction, that is, by our awareness of being *logos*, a "little" word, if you will. And the littleness of such a *logos* is not fully accurate because we can't perceive it visually...another temptation to think in terms of form. The correct way we as *logoi* perceive the *Logos* is by adopting a standard that lays beyond our comprehension. And that standard belongs to formlessness which had the added boon of transcending our innate tendency to pass judgment.

So instead of passing judgment on religious expressions from another era, it's more profitable to take into consideration our preference for form, so difficult to shake, of trying to cram what's visible (we may know something is not visible but still tend in that direction) into a form which cannot and does not exist. It's natural to do this but not normal, for the new norm we've become aware of belongs to another reality. And that reality is formlessness.

We cannot verify this by familiar tried-and-true means at our disposal. It requires something quite radical if not initially far-out sounding, the suspension of both our senses and intellect. The first thing that comes to mind, mistakenly so, is the need to concentrate and stop using our senses and as well as thinking. Sounds like suicide. Never will this approach work because the effort at concentration is a form (thoughts and emotions of which we have visible images in our heads) attempting to blot out other forms already in our heads. You could say this is the essence of vanity described by Ecclesiastes, the same forms or images rolling round and round without us getting anywhere. Now a paradox comes into play in our attempt to make the impossible possible. We employ that which has been put forth as an obstacle...the power of our most important sense, sight...to reflect upon these faculties. Or more accurately, we use our faculty of sight to represent a special inner glance which sees directly into the essence of our senses and intellect. It does so without manipulation, harm or modification of any sort. All this faculty does, if you will, is to look in the sense of beholding all things indiscriminately. Thus it parallels our physical vision but operates on a wholly different plane. A few paragraphs above reference was made to Ken Wilber's book, **Eye to Eye** where he touches upon the essence of the problem between the contemplative eye and the eye(s) of science (etc.). The former sees without an object whereas the latter sees objects. In fact, that's the whole gist of science. When you try to conceptualize the two eyes...contemplation and science on the physical plane, albeit subtle...you make a mockery of the former. In its defense, the supposed defenders of contemplation went into contortions in their attempt to conform to the scientists. And as we know, only confusion and embarrassment resulted.

The looking of concern to us doesn't come naturally but needs to be cultivated. One makes these glances in the direction of the senses and intellect as though from without them. Since it's a radical step we can't do it in a sustained, uninterrupted way but by incremental gestures,

one done now and another done a bit later. The interval between each gesture is irrelevant. It can be as short as a second or two or as long as an entire day. Awareness of time's passage never has been so pressing once you try out these gestures. Nevertheless, we persevere, keeping them short but sweet. An indelible memory, more permanent than all others, is made which can't be erased. Sometimes memory of the last gesture, especially if it has endured a longer time, creates a longing which truly aches and makes us feel unworthy to make the next gesture. These can only be called growing pains overcome by repeated gestures regardless of how we feel. In this way gradually we minimize awareness of time's passage, no mean feat. And from within one of these glances, again short but sweet, we experience time as having been suspended or even more surprisingly, that it doesn't exist. Obviously this belongs to the domain of formlessness. From this vantage point, totally unique in human experience yet accessible to all, we look back...and words now are quite tentative because they're in a realm outside their nature...upon all the forms that have assaulted us and walk away from them. Simple as that. Chances are that in the next minute we'll fall back into these forms. The big difference now is we've discovered the way out. No longer are we prisoners to forms.

In a few other articles posted on this home page the difference between natural and normal was discussed and appears here once more, albeit not as developed or reflected upon as much as desired. Still, the distinction is sufficient for the moment and awaits another step forward. That which is natural is unquestioned because it's part and parcel of our daily lives. In this unquestioned state we pay attention to the needs and desire of our hearts, minds and bodies, all characterized by a desire or climb upwards. We have a general idea that upwards is where life is better compared to down there where is not. On the other hand, the normal represents a standard that had been in existence long before we came upon the scene. Thus it's somewhat removed for our lives which gives the mistaken impression that we must conform to it, conform by striving upwards. And that means we'll never achieve it. A mistaken idea, for a norm comes down to us by our acknowledging its presence. Such seems to be the dynamic at work when we look upon our senses and intellect from a vantage point outside them through those short, discreet occasions which gradually build up and become our way of life...our norm.

Now that we're free from various natural compulsions and have exchanged them for a single overwhelming norm, we abide more fully in the realm of visible form knowing all the while that this norm is there guiding us. Because now we can see forms for what they are, limited manifestations, we're not so much bound by them as before. We've learned (or still are learning) how to function with them swirling about us, yet never are we bogged down. Another way of putting this is that since we now favor invisibility over visibility (formlessness over form), we can use forms to our personal advantage, notably those forms which are our personal defects and weaknesses. That is to say, these forms...the "bad" forms being the same as "good" forms from this vantage point...create a fine disguise to go about our spiritual work. No one knows, for we're completely out there for all to see and don't have to worry about the build up of pride and arrogance (another form!). Because it's a form, it comes into being and is

destined to fade away.

So there we have it, an outline of visibility vs. invisibility, of form vs. formlessness, of the natural vs. the normal. Following through with these ideas requires immediate practical application which is truly a pleasure to undertake. We're freed up in ways we never dreamed of before and can put to good use our personal limitations which previously had been both a hindrance and personal embarrassment. These so-called impediments belong to the visible realm and hence will never go away, that is, until death, when everything visible will perish. It might be better to say that awareness of these painful memories do not so much diminish, but we realize they have the potential of becoming a disguise to conceal our inner work from prying eyes. Should a person bother to pry, he would discover nothing attractive to look at. Such a change in our character frees us up to work in areas that need it, all hidden and withdrawn. People have long memories. That translates into having less than desirable memories of a person acting under the guise of immaturity which doesn't mean the same of having a lack of respect. It all boils down to being pigeon-holed, a behavior we all share. Yet cultivation of immaturity is the perfect disguise, tailor made for each person who feels inclined to take it up. If so, you're in for a real test to see if you feel cut out for this mode of life and can handle the inevitable misunderstandings.

The reason for going into this unfamiliar territory is that it counteracts the traditional approaches to humility as associated with spiritual practices. There's nothing pious or the like involved. However, it strikes to the root and has in mind something deeper than merely "pretending" to be immature. And that consists in doing work in the invisible realm, of having that necessary leisure to explore with care and exactitude the riches of our common religious heritage. While people are interested in this more than ever, they're confronted with a Catch-22 situation. With the assistance of modern technology so much of this heritage is available for the taking (online, for example). Yet the technology itself is a barrier because by necessity we're taken up with its maintenance and interference as through immediate access to social media which sings its Siren song and thereby take us away from the task at hand. In this situation it's easier, even comforting, to focus upon secondary sources. The work has been done on primary sources, so all we have to do is re-arrange them in a different way instead of the patience and pain traditionally associated with the primary sources. That's where a person who cultivates immaturity comes in. He has been through the long and tedious period of being hung-up and now has nothing to defend nor nothing to explain, let alone offer. So where does he go? Primary sources.

Please allow both a postscript and a caveat. This article is shot through with inconsistencies despite having gone over it numerous times before posting. Also it's written in a rather unprofessional manner which makes these inconsistencies aggravating. Yet there comes a point when you can't add more but stop and post it with the intent of returning later for a review and perhaps another article. In the long run the argument for a new approach to the religious text of the Christian and Jewish traditions is valid. How this is brought about may

differ from person to person though a common goal of reading the texts in the original languages is tantamount. Not just that but doing this through the practice of *lectio divina* which has some parallels with what transpires in a yeshiva. This is all very Western and without a doubt, at the heart of our common religious and philosophical heritage. Still, our hang-ups concerning form can get in the way even if they produce really marvelous insights. Countering them with insights into formlessness and defining it more clearly is perhaps the Next Step in any discussion with regard to making these wonderful texts available to a wider audience. However, that audience will be small. No problem, really, for it can act as leaven hidden within the larger mass of dough, the church and therefore society.

Also the background color is an experiment, nothing more.

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