

## A Different Twist to Conceiving Spiritual Advancement

Within Christian theology we find that the triangle is an image of the Trinity or Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Even though the Trinity transcends this image, if we're honest with ourselves, we conceive the Three Persons as some kind of isosceles triangle in the sky. The representation may be more subtle than that but same form is inescapable. Finally we have the circle, the most basic image of them all. It is a natural representation of perfection and eternity regardless of the variations. Each image contains a center; the triangle least of all with the square coming in second. Finally we have the circle which has a clearly recognizable center where every point on the circumference is equidistant to this center. If we stood dead center in the circle the circumference would be equidistant from our position as it moved around us. For a circle to remain a circle it's critical for the two to be in exact harmony, otherwise it would lose its shape.

This is the draw-back of a circle, for it intimates a tension or maintaining constant balance between circumference and center. If somehow the center were to move from its natural center, it'd be eccentric, literally so. The same applies to the square but not as much and even less so with the triangle. Nevertheless, all three images—so fundamental to infinite manifestations of cultural creativity—are bounded and have a center. All three images of circle, square and triangle aren't found in nature. They are constructs philosophers, theologians, mathematicians and architects to make sense of a chaotic world, and we follow in their train when attempting to bring order into our lives.

Should you decide to make a survey of Christian literature going all the way back to the Church's beginning and proceed forward to the present, stop and consider the imagery used throughout. More often than not, it's circular in one form or another; even the circle seems better than the (Trinitarian) triangle as an image of perfection. The square is left on the sidelines because its intimations of things earthly makes it suspect. A side bar, if you will: several images in the Roman catacombs have squares instead of halos. Apparently this meant the person was considered a saint while still alive.

On the positive side, consider the dimensions of the heavenly Jerusalem in the Book of Revelation. The city is a perfect cube where the number twelve (divisible by two, three, four and six) plays a dominant role. As for the circle, other images may be thrown in along with it: the sun's disk, the notion of a spiral, hierarchical ascendancy (one thinks of Dionysius and Dante among others) and in the monastic context, the liturgical cycle. Should we take up a position on the circle's circumference, we would continuously be

aware of the center. It acts both as an attractive force and one of repulsion, that is, in the gravitational sense. Such focus by the circumference upon the center is therefore at the heart our ideas concerning spiritual advancement; the same applies regarding the center.

Perhaps an alternate geometrical form to the square, triangle and circle exists, one more apropos to real life experience which usually doesn't dovetail with our pre-conceived notions of perfection. For that reason let's consider an ellipse. For the sake of discussion, let's say this ellipse is squished on top and bottom and bulges out to the left and right. We could follow our instincts and automatically look for a center as we do with the square, triangle and circle. By their very natures, all three images compel us in this direction. Nothing wrong with that, but a now familiar representation of the solar system from the astronomer Kepler alters that a bit. That is to say, the center of gravity tends towards one side or towards one side within the ellipse. For example, let's situate ourselves on the left side. This solar system image is one we'd when standing on the outside or on the edge of our immediate celestial neighborhood. Each planet circles around the sun. At one time it reaches a perigee or point closest to the sun and at the opposite end, an apogee or furthest distance from the sun.

If I recall correctly, larger celestial bodies such as galaxies and galaxy clusters—local and no so local—operate in the same fashion. The planets (sticking with them since they're more manageable) technically rotate around the sun though it might be better to say they sling-shot themselves around the sun. Let's take ourselves on the planet earth. At one point we are traveling away from the sun, and this trajectory is more lengthy, like a spread-out line or arc continuing for considerable time and distance. Then at some mysterious point we bend around as though bending around some mysterious body which is absent and make an similar arc-like trip back. Both the outward bound and homeward bound journeys are of equal length and arc or bulge ever so slightly. Once the earth approaches the sun, it goes around a tight corner, if you will, certainly tighter than the fairly extended outward and homeward journeys. At this point we are closest to the sun which counters the other pole of our apogee or point when we were furthest away.

Such a model makes us posit the following question. If we acknowledge our ex-centric position as situated off in one corner of the ellipse, is there another mysterious object out there around which the departing arc bends and then returns home? Perhaps this question reveals a tendency to look outside for a solution, whereas the solution lies within the place we've always possessed. This is not unlike an Australian boomerang.

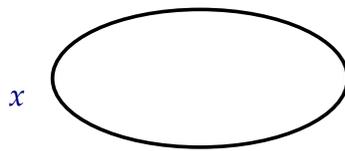
The boomerang goes out from the person who cast it and makes an arc around that other invisible center before returning home. Obviously the boomerang's shape has something to do with creating an ellipse; it may be closer to how things work in the world as opposed to the more rigid figures of a circle, square or triangle. Then again, this image may reveal how memory works instead of that cyclical motion already alluded to. Images we fabricate don't have to tie us up in circles, if you will. Rather, they can go out fairly straight, make an arc and then return to us with a refreshed picture of the world.

Thus our memories may be said to assume the shape of a boomerang, not a circle. This elliptical image is stretched out to some degree in order to delineate its four parts of perigee, apogee, outward and homeward arcs. To make the ellipse work, by necessity we are not at the center but are ex-centric, that is, enough off dead-center of the ellipse to effect this particular shape. We could extend this image of the earth's elliptical order to the earth's yearly tilt on its axis which gives us the four seasons. Supposedly the earth is more pear-shaped than round. If we were situated in space above either the north or south pole and look down upon the earth, we'd see this elliptical motion tilting just enough to produce the four seasons. We move from summer to autumn to winter to spring and back to summer. In other words, the earth's tilt gives us the impression of circular movement which has no real beginning nor end. Thus the seasonal/circular rotation is embedded within the elliptical/axial rotation and in a sense is illusory.

And so it seems that elliptical motion is more natural than the other three images of square, triangle and circle. We find more familiar examples in nature which assume the general form of an ellipse: swarms of fish, flocks of birds, deciduous trees, bushes, rocks, raindrops and cumulus clouds. They all have centers of gravity but they are more difficult to perceive. Applying the image of an ellipse to human affairs, consider race tracks (car or otherwise). Nobody races in a circle but in an ellipse. You would soon get dizzy and confused if you ran on a circular racetrack. Now let's apply this most natural of all images to the realm of spiritual advancement. Experience indicates that we alternate more between presence and absence; it isn't far off the mark to say that we go around in this fashion. Such traditional terminology has been applied throughout the ages. The only problem is that we depict this alternation as a dichotomy along the lines of shifting from one place to another and then restoring our lost balance. At the heart of such descriptions lies our old friend, the circle. Putting it somewhat wryly, maybe here is where that expression aptly applies, "going around in circles."

Elliptical motion parallels that of a circle in that both move in a circuit or both go

around. In the latter, movement is always perfectly equidistant from the center. In the former, the center of gravity must be eccentric (keeping in mind we situate it towards the left simply for illustration; the center of gravity can equally be towards the right, top or bottom). If we take our experience of prayer, contemplation or whatever word we prefer, we alternate between highs and lows, periods of exultation and depression, presence and absence. No small wonder that some image representative of a dichotomy materializes, of that shift I noted in the last paragraph. Getting more specific with regards to this image of an ellipse, we could say that a particularly strong presence of God is located during that period when the ellipse is making a sharp turn around our axis as this simple diagram illustrates:



The  $x$  is our position, and the ellipse may represent those experiences—regardless of content—to which we are subject. According to this diagram, any given experience gets closer and closer to us (let's say the rotation is clockwise according to the two arrows) until it makes a sharp turn around us (the  $x$ ) who are located at the ex-centric axis. Sometimes we see the event...and I include both external or internal ones...coming towards us but more often than not, it jumps upon us from out of nowhere. Before we give it a second thought, our attention becomes focused upon the "bend" or contracted energy, an insight applicable as well to intense experiences of joy which, if we're objective enough, contain the same basic energy. Not long afterwards this pent-up energy departs from us, sling-shot like, and we're left wondering what had happened. Both the arrival and departure occur so quickly we can't get a handle on the process, and we're left bewildered. Such is the nature of distractions in the spiritual life which often have assumed personal forms (demons, for example) and rightly so due to their intensity.

One way of dealing with these experiences is to mentally come up with some kind of image. It at least allows us to get our bearings and situate our true self from things that assault us. Not untypically, our first impulse is to visualize a circle with us at the center. This is symptomatic of our attempt to establish (or to re-establish) our center. Then again, these attempts often flounder because in essence, we want to be centered. Failed efforts result in our becoming ex-centric with the circle revolving around us out of

wack. Not that the circle is out of wack but our location respective to it. As noted earlier, the same process can apply to a square or triangle, but the circle is usually the one to which we have recourse. Watching these experiences come and go is a dizzying experience, but it doesn't necessarily have to be so. We can adopt the figure of an ellipse. Here events, etc., arrive with the same suddenness yet because of our ex-centric position, they bend around us with the same intensity and head off in the other direction. Consider these experiences in light of circular motion just posited. Again, the image of going around and around is so common for a confused state of mind and a never-ending cycle of the same old stuff. Not entirely unlike Ecclesiastes' "round and round" observation applied to the human condition. The same applies to evil which seems both circular and binding. If we substitute the image of a circle with that of an ellipse as soon as we can when something disturbing hits us, it can dissipate the negativity all the more quickly. I might add, "all the more naturally" because as noted earlier, an ellipse is the most natural figure in creation whether on the micro or macro level.

In Ephesians 3.18 St. Paul comes up with a statement which at first glance doesn't apply to an ellipse but of a square: "(that you) may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth." Its beauty lies in geometrical symmetry, easy to grasp. After all, a square is an ancient symbol of creation, and the Ephesians quote can seamlessly though implicitly be transferred to a circle or perfection. Applied to an ellipse, the breadth, depth, height and length are more flexible; each dimension feeds into each other. Related to this insight is the Church's liturgical cycle. Should we conceive the progress of liturgical events within a given year as elliptical, the image at first may be strange. Closer examination shows that the necessarily ex-centric center is Easter as well as the sacred days preceding it. From this brief period the Church's life flows outward. Most of the liturgical year consists of "ordinary time" or time after Pentecost until Advent; some of it is also inserted in between the end of the Christmas season and beginning of Lent, Ash Wednesday. This lengthy period may be visualized as constituting one or both sides of the ellipse compared with the brief, intense Easter period. An image that comes to mind and is found in much spiritual material is that of waiting which, in turn, can easily apply to the lengthy period of Ordinary Time.

The just mentioned three geometrical shapes as central to both theological and philosophical speculation offer a background to the alternate geometrical figure of an ellipse, so familiar yet overlooked. Apparently the three common geometrical figures of circle, square and triangle are man-made, whereas an ellipse is natural. Consider yet

again both the micro- and macroscopic worlds: raindrops, trees, swarms of fish, flocks of birds, planetary and galactic motions. They all have an elliptical shape. When considering this basic figure, you gradually realize that despite the appeal of the three familiar geometrical shapes, they are artificial and pose a dichotomy between us and the world. The world never lives up to any of the figures but approximates them in one way or another. The same can apply to spiritual methods and ideas founded upon circular motion. Not to say they are deficient, but a new figure might help us acquire a new vision. Should you move off center from either a circle, square or triangle, you become by definition eccentric or better, ex-centric. Yet the very shape of an ellipse requires that we be off center. On top of that, we have another center located at the opposite end necessary to keep an ellipse being an ellipse, else it'd degenerate into a teardrop shape. This is the perigee or furthest point from our ex-centric position which endows a special appeal to elliptical motion. We are both ex-centric yet have a shadow center opposite to us both known and unknown.

With this elliptical motion in mind, we can see if the figure of an ellipse has any value as a model or outline for the spiritual life. However, Christian tradition does not employ the image of an ellipse to describe our spiritual ascent; the same is applicable to other major religions. On the other hand, it's easy to find the image of a circle throughout spiritual literature as the paramount image of perfection (the square and triangle are present but to a lesser degree).

A chief image that has survived the ages is the fairly sharp distinction between God "up there" and us "down here." How sharply this distinction was at work depended upon the culture. Most favored maintaining the distinction quite rigidly, and to one degree or another we are heirs of this fundamental dichotomy. We can sum up this image in terms of us "down here" who are required to make heroic efforts to predispose ourselves for receiving divine grace from "up there." The distinction between God and us finds its roots in the Bible and has remained fairly constant throughout history. It may be better to say that Genesis was interpreted in terms of a fall, a term you don't find in the text itself.

Obviously it's a generalization to say that the ancient world relied exclusively upon the geometrical figure of a circle to express its philosophy and theology. That image had been handed down through authors such as Plato and Aristotle and then passed on to the Middle Ages. One application with roots in the related image of a triangle is that of hierarchy present from the start of the Christian church. Reality is composed of various rings or layers of being in ascending order. This notion was transferred into the

ecclesiastical structure, and the term “hierarchy” remains with us today. Thus a geometrical image and attendant insights were very much alive and associated with the official Church, usually perceived in term of power and control. Then along came the Second Vatican Council which saw the Church as the People of God. Here is a completely different way of viewing things but fraught with its own dangers. Perhaps we’re still too close to this new image for it to take shape; it may take several more generations to sink through.

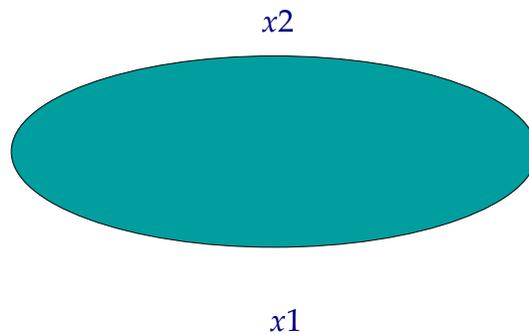
An important feature of an ellipse is that in addition to its rotation around our ex-centric position (by necessity it has to be ex-centric), upon completion of a given rotation it takes a different pitch before heading off on another rotation. For example, consider the heavens. The earth assumes a slightly different pitch around the sun each and every time it fulfills a rotation as at the completion of a year. Then the next elliptical cycle starts according to the same pattern but with a different pitch. These pitches take place on a horizontal plane with a slight “up” here followed by a slight “down” later on. Apply this to the practice of spirituality as mirrored by the Church’s yearly liturgical cycle. We go around one given liturgical ellipse (not a cycle!) and then another followed by one more and so forth. Each time we complete one rotation and begin anew, the oncoming liturgical year begins its “pitch” ever so slightly on another plane. It thus offers different perspectives on the mysteries of Christ about to be celebrated.

This notion of a pitch essential to elliptical motion is a supplemental image in order to shed more light on how we handle difficult situations or when things jump upon us with vehemence and suddenness. When they do, we haven’t the slightest clue as to their source. They are lurking out there somewhere. Should we follow the circular model, we see that they throw us off center before we realize what had happened. Efforts to restore our balance invariably are couched in circular or perhaps square-like imagery. A closer look at the general nature of trying experiences reveals that they actually “bend” around us. Instead of constantly being equidistant to us and enslaving us, this bend is a relatively short period of time compared with the full course of an elliptical figure. Under the influence of a circular model, we perceive negative experiences with much greater force, sometimes the force of fate or necessity. When so constrained, we feel compelled to follow either the impulse, habit, addiction or allegiance without reflecting upon its source. Clearly the circle model demonstrates that we’ve been thrown off center and can’t find our way back to it. But if we view ourselves as the eccentric center of an ellipse, we get quite a different picture of the same negative energy. Here the energy bends more sharply around our center. They

come more quickly and depart with equal swiftness. Thus the “down time” of their actual presence to us is that much shorter.

Another way of putting this is that when we consider the ellipse as a whole and not that part or “bend” closest to our eccentric center, negative energy takes up a considerably smaller part of the whole figure. On the other hand, a circle has this energy revolving around us always at equal distance and at equal intensity. Here’s where the popular expression comes into play, “going around in circles.” If we can grasp the elliptical model even for a second, our center is located off to the left, as it were. It allows three things: 1) as pointed out, the experiences “bend around” us more quickly. 2) the ellipse’s bulge allows us more time to see them coming towards us and 3) we behold their departure fading off with the same speed and distance as when they approached us. In both #2 and #3 there’s an identity, pretty much the same of our experiences, only one is coming and the other is going.

At this juncture keep in mind the bulging nature of an ellipse (we’re looking at it horizontally, maybe the easiest way of grasping this image). It bulges out both on top and down to the same degree. The high point of each bulge creates a horizon, if you will, as the diagram demonstrates (points  $x_2$  above and  $x_1$  below):



Both points  $x_1$  and  $x_2$  are horizons which divide the ellipse into two equal parts, left and right while not splitting the figure in two. Given our position as off to the left side, only this half is visible or that which lies left to point  $x_1$  and right to point  $x_2$ . The other half is the “dark side” or that which lies beyond our perception. Therefore awareness of one half gives rise to the insight that most likely there’s another half which runs according to the same pattern. Another way of putting is that if our ex-centric position is on the left, there must be a parallel ex-centric position somewhere off to the right.

Thus both sides balance each other off. Not that there are two centers vying for dominance but two centers required to maintain the elliptical shape. If we had in mind a circle, square or triangle (let's keep with the first as the most common one representative of perfection), dividing the circle in two from top to bottom cleaves it and abolishes the center, thereby destroying the geometrical form. At this point we're setting ourselves up for a dualistic way of viewing reality.

Troublesome experiences which hit us out of the clear blue with no warning signs demonstrate all this. We're caught off guard and flounder helplessly (again the expression or as others like it, "going around in circles"). On other hand, points  $x_2$  and  $x_1$  or points above and below the ellipse allow us more time, if you will, to see these experiences coming towards us and departing from us. We can see—using this term figuratively—their approach and gathering of intensity until they make a sharp bend around us and loose their force as they depart. The interesting point is that both their arrival and departure are of the same intensity and duration. In this way we can better situate the "bend" of such sudden negative energy as around our eccentric position, knowing full well that there's a certain sameness in their coming and going.

This similarity or perhaps even identity concerning the nature of arrival and departure with respect to negative (as well as positive) experiences is tantamount. Again I stress the importance of having in mind the right geometrical figure on which we can cast our experiences. Due to its naturalness, the ellipse is the obvious candidate. Play around for a while and see if it works. No harm will come of it. Then compare the ellipse with use of the circle. More likely than not, we'd find that we have used this figure to describe our experiences and lack of balance. Usually we're more attracted to, even fascinated by, negative experiences which is why I brought them up a few paragraphs ago. The same can be applied to positive experiences, for they have an equal "bend" with respect to our eccentric position on the ellipse. Keep in mind the points  $x_2$  and  $x_1$ , points above and below our elliptical model. These favorable experiences come, bend around us and depart according to the same pattern as negative energy. They arrive and depart at the horizon points of these two points. At first glance, from there it's anyone's guess as to what lies on the other side of these two horizons. Nevertheless, we have intuited the form of our experiences as elliptical.

We are now familiar with our ex-centric location with reference to points  $x_1$  and  $x_2$ . Not only that, we are familiar with it as reflected in nature and can transfer its symbolism into how we comport ourselves as human beings. Based on this insight, we may expand the figure's meaning. A note of caution: seeing ellipses around us is one

thing but quite another when it comes to things we can't visualize. After all, the events which hit us from the clear blue must hang around somewhere out there, crouching at the door of our awareness. It may not be far off the mark to conceive knowledge of this unknown in terms of prophecy which has its roots in the ellipse's "other half" or opposite to our ex-centric position. Better, prophecy consists in intuiting the similarity of advancing and departing events and energy with respect to the two horizons points,  $x_1$  and  $x_2$ . These events have to "come from" somewhere, affect us and then return...at least this is one way to conceive their elliptical path. Prophecy here doesn't mean predicting the future, soothsaying nor anything of the like. Because it consists in intuiting the essential sameness of everything which we encounter (point  $x_1$ ) and later reflect upon as it departs (point  $x_2$ ), we come to a better understanding of events.

Should we practice with the figure of an ellipse, we have a better map, as it were, of how to comport ourselves. After all, behind our muddled attempts to make sense of both positive and negative experiences lies that geometric tendency so basic to our human nature. This almost unconscious option sets the stage for the emergence of language and metaphors which later become crystallized. From there it's a relatively small step to the construction of a philosophy and theology to interpret our experiences.

Hitherto I have dealt with the left side of the ellipse and rightly so, for that is where we are "located." It includes our range of perceptions, the bend that events take around our ex-centric position and the horizons of  $x_1$  and  $x_2$ . By nature we desire wholeness and have an inkling that there's more to our range of perceptions despite our inability to put a finger on them. The desire for completeness is at the root of why we're unhappy and wish fulfillment. Yet again the elliptical model is helpful in that it maps this unknown reality. Not that it reveals this reality in the sense of figuring something out but as an aide to know our true nature. Familiarity with one half of how reality works (referring to our ex-centric position) allows us to cast this same familiarity onto the other half of the ellipse. After all, the geometrical figure needs to be fleshed out, and we do this by extending awareness of that familiar part of the elliptical pattern already available. Here we have a "just as-so" situation. I.e., just as the world seems modeled after an ellipse to which we can apply our experiences of reality, so what we do not know probably assumes the same shape. Better, just as the world/experiences form one half of an ellipse, so does the unknown take a similar form, namely, the other half.

Referring back to points  $x_1$  and  $x_2$  or where our perceptions of reality come into being and then leave us, we wonder, almost childlike, that they must exist in some kind of far-

off mysterious land. From time to time they visit us god-like...or no so god-like (usually the latter is the case). The word "god" is not inappropriate due to the mysterious and sudden arrival/departure of these entities. It is akin to the Greek *daimon*. They are certainly real—not imaginary—as we know from the "bend" they take around our ex-centric position within the ellipse.

Familiarity with one half of the ellipse thus leads to a hunch that the other half exists. Such a hunch is founded upon a geometrical projection where we wish to flesh out the full form. We may call it faith in the existence of this unseen half. "Faith" may not be an exact word, yet it does say (keeping in mind two paragraphs above) that just as we have an ex-centric position with respect to the ellipse's bend, so a counter point must exist...a counter ex-centric center...directly opposite us. This other half lies beyond our sight over the horizon of points  $x_1$  and  $x_2$  or before we see something coming towards us and departing from us. In other words, this stuff must come from somewhere before it hits us and must return somewhere afterwards. Actually much of our problems consist not so much in negative experiences per se but in wondering about their origin. From there we can questions like, "Does God exist?"

What gives us a clue that we're dealing with an ellipse in its total form (despite our partial vision) is faith in the elliptical form itself. This stems from our perceptions of elliptical shapes in every aspect of nature. Thus the question is: if we intuit one half of the ellipse as it applies to the way we comport ourselves, from where does our "faith" in the other half derive? Is it a figment of our imagination, a projection or wishful thinking? I don't think so, simply on the basis of how pervasive elliptical shapes are in nature. We can use our "just as-so" formula in another way by saying—and this is more abstract—just as an ellipse is the most natural shape of them all, so does it work on levels of human experience not perceptible to the eye. By that I mean our intellectual and spiritual endeavors.

As for the other invisible half of the ellipse, we don't move out physically towards it or towards the other "bend" around which that invisible half curves. Paradoxically we perceive it when moving inwards through making a gesture of remembrance or recollection. Since we're born elliptically (for lack of a better way of putting it), we have an inherent memory of this pattern which remains with us. Here we're not considering memory in the conventional sense but in the more technical definition of *anamnesis*. We shouldn't think of this as remembering an ellipse which parallels the misunderstanding of Plato's form, an ideal horse somewhere out in space and to which physical horses are just a shadow. Rather, our *anamnesis* may be conceived as perceiving the pattern of our

soul, of how it operates. Since we're elliptical by nature (again, not adequately stated)...almost boomerang-like...making an inward gesture to see that stuff of which we are made removes us from the orbit (circular!) of those things which are external to us. Traditional teaching on prayer and spirituality call them by various names such as distractions, the world, the flesh, the devil and so forth. They don't form part of our *anamnesis*-nature despite our temptations at times to think this way.

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