

Living Digitally?

Their struggle is against humanity which they deem is not worthy of greatness. Narsai, Syriac Christian author (399-502)¹

In more recent decades the approach to Christian prayer has undergone a fundamental shift. Such changes are welcome, for prayer is dynamic, not at all static. Generally speaking it was considered (as still is for some folks) constituting either as vocal or mentally cultivated images of the sacred. In sum, one's mind must be occupied at all times with this or that object. Thus the practitioner found himself in an uncomfortable balancing act which heightened the risk of falling out this practice. An uncomfortable place to be by any standard, and a real turn-off for any prospective candidates. At the heart of this struggle was not to have one's mind blank, just about the worse thing possible. Such a position has been a real barrier to a deeper understanding until fairly recently.

To be sure, there's nothing wrong with occupying one's mind with holy thoughts and images, the realm to which prayer was pretty much confined. Even though most folks went along with this program, nowadays with exposure to so many practices and cultures we can appreciate the limitations under which they worked. Also, a number of people must have felt something was missing but couldn't quite articulate it. Yet the real bugaboo was the fear that "emptying the mind" was dangerous in the extreme, bordering upon...if not...outright heresy.

Another offshoot is how quickly religion had vanished from society. There was a time, quite recently in fact, when it was rather pervasive. It's disappearance within a generation—not more than two—is a clear indication that while its tentacles spread far and wide, religion had shallow roots when it came to transforming one's life. It was more a cultural inheritance to which to be attached. No surprise there, really, but when external forces conspired to bring about the minimizing of religion, we were left with no real transcendental legs to stand upon. Once the veil had been lifted, everyone was surprised, even shocked, when in reality there was no need for such a reaction.

At some juncture (let's say around the mid 1960's with this shallowness became more evident with rather brutal suddenness) greater interest in

¹ The reason for this quote is touched upon at the end of the essay.

meditation came on the scene and hasn't departed since. However, it's association with those wild days imparted a negative slant which lasts to the present day and often is used as a reference point by conservatively minded people as a cautionary tale. Partly responsible for this suspicious attitude was exposure to practices from the East such as Transcendental Meditation and Zen, threats that were muscling in on religious turf normally associated with Christianity. The real danger when you cut away the trappings? These practices encouraged what many as that old specter rearing its head once again, turning one's mind into a blank. This, of course, was the strongest possible fear notably for Catholics and evangelicals. Once the initial thrill with Eastern influences wore off, they continued to develop slowly but surely, out of the limelight. At the same time this clash was taken as a wake-up call. It hit upon the above mentioned feeling that there's something more to prayer than thoughts and vocalization of words. Perhaps even the word "prayer" might be obsolete. The same with meditation which implies mental activity as opposed to bringing it to rest.

To counter the initial enthusiasm for Eastern religion, thoughtful Catholics began to dig more deeply in their own tradition to see if they had anything parallel to it. Indeed they did. Catholic Christianity had a grand tradition of contemplative prayer, but alas, it was confined to those in religious orders, and even there it was limited to a few members. Suspicions toward it ran deep for too many reasons beyond the scope of this article. It may seem pretty outrageous now, but to claim that the tradition of contemplative prayer was for everyone indeed was a momentous step, so momentous that some hesitation remains in accepting this today².

Yet while some bold and exciting work was being done here—one could almost call it pioneer work—the increasing secularization of society and culture was starting to get under way big time. Already it had begun, but now the process was getting serious and promised to be more so. On the other hand, some who had been raised in a more conservative, traditional religious environment, felt that any interest in the Church's contemplative heritage was questionable and decided it was time to push back. They favored

² Around the time of the Second Vatican Council Pope John XXIII issued an encyclical entitled **Pacem in Terris**. If I recall correctly, he defined the church as consisting of all those persons of good will. Although it seemed to have no direct bearing upon the revival of contemplative prayer for everyone, it reflects the spirit of the times. This may be characterized by the laity beginning to realized what their Christian tradition had to offer them...almost as though they were being kept in the dark.

reinvigorating more traditional forms of prayer that had fallen out of favor, these based upon vocalization and the cultivation of holy mental images noted above. They continued fostering these practices despite the fact that mainstream Christians seem to be moving elsewhere without recourse to such practices.

All this, of course, is transpiring within the context of a secular society...secular to such a degree that it's hard to see it can get more that way unless some dictatorial regime supersedes it. Also a lot of deep questioning is now underway with regard to the value of religion, far more than at any other time, that having some bearing upon this modest article. One good thing religion has going for it (and never will this make the headlines) is its antiquity and appreciation for ancient texts as related to the practice of contemplative prayer. In other words, somehow it always remained in touch with its roots despite gross forgetfulness. Now it seems that the so-called laity who weren't considered "worthy" of contemplative prayer are taking the lead in both research and practice. An important source for this centers around the Church Fathers and less well known but just as important authors of the Eastern tradition, notably those who wrote in Syriac ³.

Yet prior to these sources, of course, we have the most important one of them all, the Bible. For a long time it has been taken literally and in some quarters this holds true today. On the other hand we have the familiar practice of science debunking the Bible as well as modern academic research questioning much of its contents. This latter approach treats the Bible more as a historical document. To top it off, there's the familiar accusation that Catholics never read the Bible. They have the sacraments, especially the Mass, so any exposure to the Bible reached Catholics through these means. All in all we have a potent, confusing mix which contributed to eroding its credibility and authority. Yet beyond this lies a genuine benefit. Perhaps the best ways out of this conundrum is to approach the Bible in the spirit of *lectio divina*. This practice is the primary focus of the home page at hand. Because it's discussed in virtually every document, we won't delve into it further unless something arises later in this article that needs to be clarified ¹. Thus *lectio* goes a long way to clear away a whole lot of clutter to make room for a more mature approach based on the above mentioned cultivation of contemplative prayer.

³ Interest in the Syriac tradition is bound to increase by reason of its location straddling the Eastern and Western worlds. I.e., Syriac seems to be a good Christian vehicle for dealing with Buddhism and Hinduism, it having spread as far East as China and perhaps Japan.

The rediscovery of the Bible through the medium of *lectio divina* along with non-biblical texts such as the Church Fathers and lesser known but equally valid traditions is awakening many people to knowledge of material they never knew existed. Then we can throw in a fresh reading of Plato whose influence on Christianity is enormous. Nevertheless, it seems this approach is appreciated by a relative few people. Reason? For centuries Plato⁴ was confined to the rarefied air of the academic world which isn't at all the audience for which he intended his writings. If you can get a good grasp on what he's saying, you're well on the way to an understanding of the entire Christian tradition of mysticism.

As for those interested in recovering all this wonderful material, it seems the responsibility falls to small, well organized and highly motivated groups who are determined to hold the influence of secularism at bay. They comprise networks meaning loosely organized groups that can ebb and flow with the push and shove of external forces. They're almost like jellyfish which don't have a skeletal structure enabling them to bounce around with relative impunity. Even better, they're more difficult to pin down by any potential enemy. The best historical precedent points to how for some two thousand years Jews have held onto their tradition, even faced extinction as with the Holocaust, and continue to thrive. At the heart of their sustenance, of course, is the Bible and all sorts of traditions that grew up with its interpretation. And so they were (are) hovering in the background keeping their way of life very much alive.

The key to any success (keeping in mind that always it'll be modest, not spread far and wide) is the establishment of a network as just noted. It has the advantage of ringing true with a large audience by reason of it being modeled upon computer technology. A network involves a number of different things going on simultaneously which work independently of each other yet remain in parallel. Such a network is free from the constraints of having a top or bottom. This can be dangerous for more traditionally minded people, for it implies the absence of a hierarchy, a loaded word which is out of fashion though exists in ecclesiastical circles.

⁴ Socrates, of course, is at the heart of Plato's writings. He doesn't seem to be quoted or referred to much when it comes to the Church Fathers. Perhaps a fear of paralleling him, even superseding him, with Jesus Christ has something to do with it.

In place of this more traditional view a network has a number of open-ended connections which increases the possible interaction between them. Perhaps the chief characteristic of such an organization is the absence of a central executive authority which oversees everything. A lot of back and forth which may be termed redundancy is present maintains overall function of the network should one or more part become disabled, even destroyed. This, therefore, amounts to one network rubbing up against the other (for lack of better a term) for mutual support.

The whole point of introducing the element of a network is to contrast it with the way many religious and philosophical schools or ways of teaching had developed in earlier centuries. People gathered around a master recognized for his holiness and insight. After his death, there was the danger of altering the teaching, even perverting it. Out of concern to preserve the master's original teaching a single source of authority helped to keep things under control. Still there remained the danger of alterations as well deviations from the original source. This put the whole school in danger which ran the risk of collapse. With the idea of a network this traditional system can be more flexible, looser. The teaching originating from an individual master can arise as it always had. However, it can be diffused within a whole number of networks simultaneously.

With computer technology there's no fear of losing original insights since they are registered perfectly, a mirror copy, if you will. However, this doesn't preclude people from making alterations, even deviations with the copies. As for the network entrusted with preserving a given heritage, should one unit be cut off...even destroyed...another takes its place and so forth, replicating itself with precise fidelity to the original plan. With so many networks spread out, it might be easy to insert a deviation, but the benefit of this arrangement is that people would pick up on it and report it immediately. In other words, a network creates a system of check and balances that operates pretty much instantaneously without appeal to a higher authority. The network *is* the authority which is adept at concealing its identity; guerrilla tactics, so to speak, at least from the view of a traditional setup of authority.

So how does this fit in as a potential model as related to spirituality? Nowadays we hear lots of talk about algorithms⁵. They are essential for maintenance of a network as well as providing the means by which they interconnect. Even though the notion of an algorithm has become common parlance, we can persist in thinking networks linked together in a physical manner even though we know they are not. In other words, our inclination to look for a physical model and turn it into invisible strings tied together. However, the real binding force is digital. That means despite the complexity involved, it all boils down to an interaction of ones and zeros, perhaps the simplest components anyone can think of. Zero may represent that which is completely beyond experience...the transcendent and one may represent the world around in all its physicality. Thus zero and one can represent the interaction between the two. This may be stretching it a bit but is simply a stab in the direction of trying to incorporate some modern ideas from the computer world over to spirituality.

One element lacking in a digitally related model is the idea of the sacred or holy which inherently contains a presence and can't be associated in terms of a switch. More precisely, a switch is either off or on; no ambiguity here. Perhaps it's better to say a model hasn't be developed though a number of people may attempt to set one up. They'd be working with a model whose very nature has changed dramatically. Here the goal is to make a full replication of what already exists...a virtual one...which at least for now lacks plenty of shortcomings with regard to the original.

As for the sacred, it's one of humanity's oldest sentiments, if not the most fundamental one shown toward something as yet unknown or un-discoverable while at the same time is most real. Yet as applied to a network, algorithm and the digital realm in general, everything is laid out there for all to see. There's nothing hidden and clearly no sense of mystery. As for an algorithm or governing principle, its most likely it would reduce the sacred to human sentiments which are manageable. On the other hand, the algorithm would be completely oblivious to any object toward which these sentiments are directed, dismissing them as figments of the imagination. While we seem safe for the

⁵ The simplest definition of an algorithm: a set of guidelines that define how to perform a task.

moment, the possibility remains in the future that the sacred too will be mapped out...or so is the wish of some.

The prospect that everything can be reduced to algorithms sounds frightful. The sky's the limit, literally meaning the universe itself is not immune to being replicated in the distant future, or so is the wish of some. This drive is one of the most basic to us humans. It isn't simply to control everything but to replicate everything down to the last detail. Also involved is the pure satisfaction of having a model. We all take delight in the model of a ship, plane or anything else on the mantelpiece. It doesn't do anything special but is present just for the sake of being there, a decoration or enhancement of our home. But the model in mind is to endow it with a life of its own, for once replicated, it would be very interesting...scary...to let it run loose. Thus it seems the sacred has no place in this scheme because it's immune to being tamed.

If the sacred seems immune to replication (at least for now...and many hope it remains so) by an algorithm, what then? Is it within the realm of possibility or wishful thinking? The problem with the sacred as far as an algorithm goes is that it's beyond measurement. The two are simply incompatible which doesn't preclude an attempt of the latter to bring the former under subjection. Even if an algorithmic-minded group knew it was impossible, it would revolt and do so with considerable violence. Perhaps that's something we can look forward to with fear and trepidation in the not too distant future. It would make any previous persecution look insignificant. In fact, a conflict using imagery belonging to the "end times" would not be inappropriate.

The tragedy at hand is the attempted elimination, both intentionally and unwittingly, of the only agent which bestows real freedom. Such a basic tussle has engaged mankind for as long as we know, that is, how we function in a religious context. A look at some of the Hebrew prophets as well as historical books of the Bible recount many instances where people struggled between revelation of the Lord and local divinities. This, of course, assumes that the element of the divine—fully transcendent or partly so—remains present. At the same time it should be noted that the divinity itself hasn't been brought into question as whether or whether or not it exists. This is clear from a reading of Job who despite horrendous afflictions, never doubted God's existence.

Perhaps this tendency by the Israelites to worship so-called indigenous gods is a foreshadowing that much later would blossom into eliminating the sacred altogether, replacing it with easily manageable “secular” rites and ceremonies. Yet today this rather annoying entity called the sacred continues to hang on despite efforts either to eliminate or ignore it altogether. Can we find any precedence for this age-old struggle? One record in history which seeks again not so much to destroy but to ignore the sacred can be seen as it relates to the Hebrew noun *davar*. It means word-as-expression and is akin to the Greek *logos*, that being assigned to Jesus Christ as in John’s Gospel.

With reference to those biblical texts posted on this homepage under the overall catch-word “expansion,” many point out the importance of *davar* (the verb is spelled the same). In sum, *davar* as word-which-has-been-spoken governs the direction of a given biblical text insofar as it issues from God’s mouth. Take it away and we have nothing but words in the common sense strung together representing events with little or no reference to a sacred or transcendent reality. Keeping in mind earlier remarks concerning an algorithm, this would be one example for its application. *Davar* is both the transcendent governing authority and initiator of events, enabling a whole series of developments to fall in line. It’s beauty consists in being ancient with modern application.

In addition to *davar*, many biblical books begin their verses with the conjunctive *v-* which is rendered most commonly as “and” but can go untranslated. It serves to show the close connection between events, making them flow into one another. Tie this in with *davar* which occurs frequently and you have a quick succession of divine utterances either directly or through the medium of a prophet. If these two elements are brought to the forefront of our attention, they have the potential of leading us into a deeper understanding of the biblical text...not just an understanding but the ability to dispose us to awareness of the sacred.

As for our current state of affairs, everything is becoming increasingly digitalized and seems like the trend will continue indefinitely. Then again, what seems as inevitable as a steamroller isn’t necessarily true. The prospect that this model will hang around a long time is that it’s made of two of the simplest components, the numbers zero and one. This makes it certain that they won’t be going anywhere soon. Either something is zero (off) or it’s one (on). That’s

all there is to it. From these most basic of all building blocks there can arise the most complex developments which in the end consist of zero or one.

Pushing this model a bit further and perhaps overdoing it a bit, *davar* may represent the number one and points to the source...silence...from which it emerged, the number zero. That's why *davar* is almost always associated with its source as in the familiar "Thus says the Lord" or "Hear the word of the Lord." A prime requisite, of course, is being disposed to listen (and this implies interior silence) after which the *davar* enters and takes up its home.

The remarks thus far, admittedly not developed as well as they should be by reason of a rather amateurish approach, stem from an inkling I've had for many years: Western spirituality lacks adequate words for awareness and/or consciousness. It's there as far as psychology and study of the brain goes but pretty much absent where it can make a positive difference in peoples' lives, that is, through the medium of spirituality. This presence is from the beginning or from the ancient Greeks although you have to dig for it to appreciate it. And this digging isn't an easy task. We have to put up with centuries of accretions. How, when and where (if at all) it fits in with the remarks about a perception of things digitally speaking is unclear at this point.

What we do know for certain is that something is lacking. We're not sure as to its identity. Perhaps people know it has a lot to do with awareness but are afraid to speak out of fear of being branded a heretic or the like. Then we have Buddhism and Hinduism. They throw around awareness-related terms (and very sophisticated ones at that). This feature could why many spiritual seekers go that route compared with Christianity. To go with awareness/consciousness can mean infiltrating Christianity with concepts foreign to it. So goes the misperception.

In light of this crisis—and it is one in the literal sense of being at a crossroad where we must go left or right—it behooves us to address the situation and offer some remedies, albeit imperfectly. Because awareness/consciousness talk has been lurking in the background all along, seeing how it might fit in with our Western tradition of religion and philosophy can be daunting. It involves a reappraisal of core documents and the beliefs that flow from them. This doesn't mean altering them or reading something foreign into them. It involves pointing out the apparent lack of awareness and terms related to it as well as suggestions as how/when/where to fill them in. Also awareness acts as a silent witness against which all sorts of events, influential or otherwise, come on the

scene, stay awhile and then pass on. In other words, the basic tenet seems to be that while stuff is really out there, somehow it's representative of something else going on behind the scene.

Now to get more concrete. This document is located in the Lectio Divina Home page meaning that we can look at that practice, for example, through the reading of the New Testament in the original Greek.⁶ Prepositions either by themselves are prefixed to nouns and verbs play a vital role in showing various shades of meaning in the text. They are familiar to scholar and non-scholar alike, yet often overlooked as pointing toward what we're trying to get at here. Appreciating them isn't done not by the usual academic approach. Instead, we can start with the literal meaning of the prepositions and see how they impinge upon the context in which they find themselves. In other words, beside carrying out their necessary functions, they bestow an atmosphere upon the text which can find an echo in oneself.

Focusing upon how the prepositions relate to each other slows down your reading of the text automatically. This leads to a suspension of your thinking process in exchange for being present to the text, the goal of *lectio divina*. Here we can substitute for the usual thinking process an awareness of how the prepositions are interacting. We don't manipulate them nor try to see anything beyond them but are present to that which they're at the service of evoking. There's nothing "scholarly" about this at all though knowledge of Greek is essential. However, a clear presentation can be done which points to a realm which in essence we normally don't access. This is part of a reality we all desire because of the longing it evokes when doing it either for first time or for many times.

Going about it in this fashion is direct yet fraught with possible mistakes simply because it hasn't been articulated as clearly as it should. Nevertheless, it's right on the money when it comes to filling in that long-missing gap or terms related to awareness/consciousness. And so what we all desire always has been embedded within the text but overlooked simply because our awareness, the most fundamental part of being a person, never got tapped into and brought to the forefront. Having spelled this out a bit we can narrow down our illustration of awareness through two particular examples taken from the New Testament.

⁶ A number of such texts are already on this Lectio Divina site.

Let's center upon the Greek words *adialeiptos* and *diapantos*. The former is found in 1Thes 5.17: "pray constantly." The latter is found in Lk 24.53, the concluding words of that Gospel: "and were continually in the temple blessing God." I chose both because they're related to prayer and the problem of relating to what we designate as God vis-à-vis everyday existence, the two often seemingly incompatible. In addition, both include the preposition *dia-* or through. *Adialeiptos* consists of the verbal root *leipo* or to leave, leave behind and implies a forsaking. *Dia-* prefaced to it intensifies this, making it through and through with no turning back. Now we can throw in the alpha privative which negates first the root and then the preposition. The result? There's no leaving-behind in a thorough (*dia-*) manner. It turns out to be null and void.

All this is tied in with the verb *proseuchomai* or to pray, another candidate with a preposition, this one being *pros-*, indicative of direction-towards which. *Proseuchomai* also means to worship as well as to intercede for, *pros-* suggesting a directness that'd be lacking if not prefaced to the root *euchomai*. Now this phrase can be read, albeit awkwardly, something like "pray (*euchomai*) in the direction toward-which (*pros-*) minus (*a-*) leaving behind (*leipo*) that which is thorough (*dia-*)." In such this prayer as direction toward-which is done without interval, that pertaining to space as well as to time.

As for *diapantos* related to the disciples blessing God in the temple, it consists of the adjective *pan* or all prefaced with *dia-* or through...through all. The idea is that such blessing, while confined to a particular place, nevertheless is done in this fashion. *Diapantos* thus conveys an attitude where an action is sustained regardless of external (or internal) events. In other words, it's in a state of continuous passing-through, not stopping.

Obviously countless examples may be given, hence one of the driving forces behind the Lectio Divina Homepage. Here two examples are singled out as a way of deepening our appreciation of pray, of stepping out of familiar molds while being faithful to the original.

The transition laid out in this article from a digitally oriented world to prayer and then on to perceiving prayer in term of awareness/consciousness may sound pretty far-fetched outlined as such. A lot more research is desired (that's obvious) but at this stage just slamming these elements together is a task in and by itself.

The title *Living Digitally?* has a question mark, deliberately so. It suggests that any model of living and therefore of praying based on a digital format may

or may not have validity. When you try to make associations with a discussion of awareness, you're in a realm that for most of us is foreign. At the same time it's available in Western texts on prayer as well as philosophy (the best and oldest kind, if you will). To appreciate this means examining a given text (the two examples from the Greek New Testament are singled out) not as it's done customarily and familiar to a larger audience but in accord with the practice of *lectio divina*. Sticking with that practice may not seem as "professional" as other approaches. Part of the reason, it could be argued, is that lacks customary discipline as many perceive it such as in the academic world. Nevertheless, the goal of *lectio divina* is to shepherd a reader of scripture (and ancient philosophical texts) to an immediate presence of the holy.

I conclude this essay with some observations of a quote under the title of this essay. It comes from Narsai, a Christian author whose native language was Syriac and considered second only in influence to St. Ephrem. The quote has a concise, to-the-point way of saying something that affects us today or better, in a way that we may not have thought of before. By that I mean many people are afflicted by a negative self-image. Throw in religion and you have even more problems, a transcendent God faced off with limited, weak human beings.

Narsai is contending with those who were keen on developing all sorts of schemes as to why humanity isn't worthy of God, this despite the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. They're cunning enough to acknowledge this basic teaching yet can't refrain from fudging it...accepting it but piling all sorts of qualifications upon it. It can serve as a breeding ground where those algorithmic based ideas discussed earlier are allowed to take foothold. By dwelling upon human weakness and sinfulness vis-à-vis God, the door is open to assault God or so goes the plan.

In essence this backfires. Even though under the guise of being Christian, to hold up humanity as not being worthy of the greatness effected by Christ's Incarnation amounts to a denial of Christianity itself. Nevertheless, the sentiment contained in Narsai's statement rings true for us all because we're tempted constantly to ascribe to it.

As for getting one more plug in for this talk about awareness/consciousness, applying it to Narsai's observation may not so much eliminate the problem. However, it can offer a way to address it in less restrictive language or language that's pretty much attracted to forms and afraid to let go of them.

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