

OUR PATHWAY TO GOD: SIGHT

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AFTER DISCUSSING desire in the last issue of *Compass*, we now consider our pathway to God through the senses. Augustine's *Confessions* sets the scene. Once he finds the 'Beauty so ancient and so new' after his, at times, misguided quest, he does not deny but rather appeals to the language of the senses:

You called, shouted, broke through my
deafness;
you flared, blazed, banished my *blindness*;
you lavished your *fragrance*, I gasped; and
now I pant for you;
I *tasted* you, and now I hunger and thirst;
you *touched* me, and I burned for your peace.

Clearly, Augustine is not saying that God, as immaterial, can be known by the physical senses in a way that resembles knowledge of material objects. Augustine suggests two points. Our senses give access to the world around us. Understood thus, they are doorways through which we can detect traces of God's presence in creation, events and people.

But, Augustine is also alluding to a figurative use of the five senses, namely, as metaphors for different modes of perception, desire and response to God and to spiritual realities. Both appeals to the human sensorium are found in the Scriptures, especially in the Psalms, to express (and nourish) the desire for God. They both lie at the core of Jesus' manner of teaching in the Gospels, with his constant recourse to sense experience (*e.g.*, of nature) and to image and metaphor (*e.g.*, seeing/blindness; hearing/deafness) to tap human yearnings and resistances while revealing God's desires for us.

Consider 1 John 1: 1-4 where the author draws on the different senses to speak of the visible reality of the Word made flesh:

Something that has existed from the beginning, that we have heard, and we have seen with our own eyes; that we have watched and touched our hands; the Word who is life...

This text reveals how seriously God takes the material world and, especially, our bodies. We are reminded later that in Jesus' 'body lives the fullness of divinity, and, in Him, too you find your own fulfillment' (Col. 2:9). It is through Jesus' humanity that *the fullness* of the divinity is revealed to us. Further, through sharing in Jesus' humanity as the divine Image, we cooperate in the divine action whereby we are slowly transformed into the divine likeness.

This provides the setting of our first pathway to God: the sense of *sight*. I would like to explore two themes: first, seeing and not-seeing God (and associated areas of the kataphatic, the apophatic and theology of the cross); second, seeing/being seen and seeking God.¹

Seeing and Not-Seeing God

The Christian spiritual tradition has consistently used sensory language to express human encounters with the divine. One of its central themes, namely, the complementary modes of perception (seeing/not seeing), find an early expression in the Book of Exodus in three scenes. Our concern here is not the level of historical memory preserved in these stories. It is, rather, that these scenes offer small dramatic dialogues illuminating an aspect of religious truth that is the overarching purpose of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures.

The *first* scene is Exodus 3: 1-6: 13-14: (Burning Bush and revelation of the divine name). Spend a few minutes reading it.

What do we find? Moses recognizes the

holiness of the place; he hears his name spoken; he meets the God of his ancestors who reveals the divine name. First, the story reveals the Jewish sense of God's holiness.

To say God is 'holy' denotes a being 'Wholly other', 'totally different' from creatures and creation. An encounter with the 'holy' prompts a response to the *mysterium fascinans et tremendum*, (in the words of Rudolf Otto)². We are captured by awe and wonder. We feel both excited and afraid. We tremble, not in abject fear, but because we are *lost for words*. We are reduced to silence and reverence before a mystery immeasurably beyond us. This is God as *transcendent*—totally unlike any other being.

Second, Moses is addressed personally (to be explored later). More importantly, the divine name precisely as *personal* (YHWH) is revealed to Moses, one among other names for God within the evolving Hebrew religious consciousness.³ This name for God was regarded as sacred. It was not written or spoken in Hebrew but instead was replaced by *Adonai* (an analogous practice recently revived).⁴ Two things need noting here.

First, in Semitic cultures, to reveal one's name was a form of gift. It was placing oneself in the hands of another, hence, in a way, in their power. Again, God is unique but (importantly) is a personal being who acts and who wants to have a relationship with Moses, Israel and with us. The God who discloses the divine name and in so doing is vulnerable to, for instance, rejection, is also the God who will be there for us. The precise meaning of the divine name *Ego Eimi ho on*, 'I Am Who I Am,' continues to be obscure but it has something to do with the verb 'to be.' It denotes actively causing, for instance, creation.

Jesuit theologian, John Courtenay Murray (significant in drafting the *Declaration on Religious Freedom* of Vatican II), has suggested that the Greek '*Ego Eimi ho on*' could be translated in palindromic form as 'I shall be there as who I am shall be there.' This is the God of



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the Covenant—who will always be *here for us*, is always faithful, has carved our names on the palm of His hand.

Murray also offers a theological analysis of this text as containing a threefold revelation: God's immanence or presence in history ('I shall be there'); God's transcendence to history, the mystery of God's own being ('I shall be there as who I am') where the divine mystery is 'a mode of absence'; finally, divine transience through history in that, despite the divine absence in mystery, God will reveal himself through saving action, 'through the saving events of the sacred history of Israel'. God's will is revealed but his being and nature, the depths of the divine 'self' remain unknown.⁵ In all this, divine intimacy balances and reveals God's holiness. One could even say that, in Moses, we see a gradual sense of feeling 'safe' to gaze at the mystery of the all holy God such that the Lord God 'would speak with Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend' (Ex. 33:11).

This is expanded in our *second text*, Exodus 24: 12-18 (Moses and Elders on the mountain). Note the final sentences: 'He laid no hand on these notables of the sons of Israel: they gazed on God. They ate and they drank.' This text is a beautiful confluence of how God is utterly beyond us yet closer to us than we are to ourselves. We have seen the friendship between God and Moses.

The Elders' relationship with God has another element. They are protected by the rules of hospitality. In being accepted into the family of the clan chief, these seventy leaders can

share a meal in the presence of the divine host. They are 'safe' to gaze on God, to enter into an intimate domain that will not overwhelm them. This is an anticipation of the Eucharist. God's protecting hand will 'shade' them, an image that brings us to our *third text* and a question.

What of the other side of the experience of God, namely, that which we can describe as '*non-seeing*'? We have touched on this briefly in speaking of God's transcendence to history. But let's consider Exodus 33: 12-23.

In the first part of this passage, again we find the personal interaction between Moses and God. Moses is God's friend since he has won God's favour, because God knows him 'by name', and importantly, God's name has been revealed to and through Moses.

This is probed further. In the dialogue, When Moses asks to be shown the divine 'glory' he is given a two-layered response. The signs of the divine presence ('face') have been revealed through Moses, in God's reconciliation with Israel through the divine mercy. Moses is told that he cannot see God's face 'for man cannot see me and live.' This can be an expression of divine freedom. It can also throw another light on the holiness of God. It is not that God is destructive. It is rather that the reality of God is too vast and profound for us to grasp. As we cannot look directly at the sun for too long without being blinded, so it is with God.

The scene mirrors this divine sensitivity. As the divine glory passes by, God's 'hand' shades and, once removed, Moses can see God's 'back' disappearing into the shadows. The divine presence, its all-encompassing mystery, becomes transparent by being filtered in creation, in events and people. This is consonant with God as tender, compassionate and, while holy, is intent on intimacy with us. God protects us from a reality utterly beyond us and enables us to approach it 'safely.' The mystery of Truth's beauty is captured in similar language by Emily Dickinson.

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant-
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise.

As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually-
Or every man be blind

Kataphatic and Apophatic: Light and Darkness

Seeing and not-seeing, then, are two complementary sides to the experience of God. There is one of light, the positive or kataphatic 'way' in which images, ideas, symbols and language are sources that help nourish and express the relationship with God. The other is a path of darkness or the apophatic way where, traced back to the Pseudo-Dionysius, the experience of the darkness of unknowing is a path into the mysteries of God that lie in 'hidden silence.' Here, a person finds such imaginal, conceptual, sensate and linguistic supports lose their effectiveness or appeal. There is a deepening yearning for God but it is met by a divine presence that seems to be in a form of 'luminous darkness.'

This is the pattern of spiritual development whereby the cooperating heart moves towards presence before God through the momentum of desire. 'Way' can be misleading since it gives the impression that one chooses one of these 'ways' to seek God. It is true that temperament, personal preference and development are important considerations in how one follows the spiritual path, especially in one's style of prayer. But there is a sense that, if the spiritual quest is primarily, and increasingly, the work of God, any 'way' is something that chooses us.

Again, this two-sided aspect is integral to the work of theology. While there is a natural desire to see God and faith is already a participation in the divine light, our knowledge is still 'through a glass darkly.' At the very start of his *Summa*, Aquinas captures this thorough

the image of a bat using radar-like soundings to find its way through its world without sun or light. God so far surpasses the human intellect that it resembles, ‘the sun, which is supremely visible, cannot be seen by the bat by reason of its excess of light.’⁶

Similarly, Denys Turner points out, in trying to understand God and God’s ways, we get to a point where we are talking too much OR just run out of words. We can only be silent. We can neither ‘see’ nor speak. We can only gaze, wordless, before the unutterable mystery of God. Of Aquinas he notes:

There is no doubt at all that for Thomas all theological speech is in principle grounded in that silence from which it first emerged, and into which it inevitably falls helplessly back.⁷

Theology at the Foot of the Cross

Finally, Martin Luther is helpful here with a theology in which ‘the cross puts everything to the test.’ So far, we have talked about seeing which can be expressed as the ‘light of faith’ and, alternatively, the ‘darkness of faith’ that cannot see or see clearly. Understood in this way, theology’s role in articulating faith has to grapple with the fact that, as Alister McGrath says,

...we cannot grasp God fully; we are walking in the dark, rather than in the light; our grip on reality is only partial and deeply ambivalent; we are assaulted by temptation, doubt, despair.⁸

In fact, McGrath notes that Luther, in trying to capture the theologian’s task, uses for his controlling image the one found above of God passing and disappearing into the shadows (Ex. 33). ‘The one who sees the visible rearward parts of God as seen in suffering and the cross deserves to be called a theologian.’⁹ McGrath goes on to say that Luther’s point is that we do not walk alone but we are accompanied by the One who suffered and died for us and who will never abandon us.

The cross, like Mount Sinai, may be enfolded by clouds and darkness. Yet God remains present in this darkness, transcending both our

capacity to discern him and our willingness to trust him.¹⁰

McGrath uses CS Lewis as an example. Lewis’ rational efforts of a faith trying to make sense of suffering in *The Problem of Pain* in 1940 crumble with his loss and grief at the death of his wife Joy, twenty years later, in *A Grief Observed* (1961). Earlier, the man of faith who tried to bring a rational approach to suffering and pain did so more in terms of abstract ideas. Later, he came to realize how ‘a rational faith can fall to pieces when it is confronted by suffering as a personal reality.’ Lewis rediscovered his faith through his own suffering. He turned to God and found the door slammed in his face ‘and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence.’¹¹ This impelled him to theology done at ‘the foot of the Cross.’

McGrath reminds us that we must not abandon Lewis’ delight ‘in the capacity of Christian faith to make sense of things.’ But neither should we so misunderstand this that the ‘Christian sun illuminates every aspect of the landscape so that no shadows remain.’ Luther’s concern is that many aspects of that landscape remain ‘shrouded in darkness.’ His theology of the cross, of faith amidst darkness is, McGrath suggests, ‘a critical theology’ in which we ‘recognize the limitations under which faith exists in the world.’¹²

Seeing and Being Seen

We come to our second theme where *seeing* is associated both with *being seen* and *seeking*.

Desire for God is often conveyed through the image of sight and specifically the yearning to see *the face of God*. The Psalmist prays ‘let us see your face and we shall be saved [or safe]’ (Ps 79:3).

There is a close connection between seeing God’s face and the gracious presence of God that brings salvation or *shalom*. The latter is not simply peace. It is wholeness or *well-being* in oneself and with others. Alternatively, the Psalmist prays that he not be rejected or incur divine displeasure—‘do not hide your

face from me' (27:9).

It seems that the shining of God's face had its original setting in Jewish worship. In surrounding 'pagan' cultures, the statues of temple gods were uncovered as the climax of the liturgy. This was borrowed by the Jews to express a 'cultic theophany', namely, the personal experience of the living, active Lord God realized in liturgical action.¹³

With Jesus, seeing God moves to another level. The transparency of God, limited to God's will and action in history in the book of Exodus now expands to give access to the being and nature of God. While the depths of God are 'rich' (Rom. 11:38), we now have Jesus the 'image of the unseen God', the divine prototype through whom all else is created (Col. 1:15).

Consider 1 John 3: 1-2. The Father's love is 'lavished' on us so that we are members of the divine family. Though John's main focus is on future glory, it has implications now. Through a life of faith, we already 'see' the face of God in Jesus. The more we gaze on Jesus, the more we become like him.

This reflects a common theme in the Greek religious tradition, namely that 'like would know like.' The human being who sees God *knows* God and is divinized, namely, shares somehow in God's life and becomes 'god-like.'¹⁴ Paul expresses it thus: 'And we, with our unveiled faces reflecting like mirrors the brightness of the Lord, all grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image that we reflect' (1 Cor. 3: 18).

St. Irenaeus is helpful here. We often read his phrase 'the glory of the God is the human person fully alive.' We rarely see the following words that answer an implied question: 'what does fully alive mean?' They are *visio dei*—'the vision of God', 'beholding God', 'living in the presence of God.' We are only completely alive and happy through a life centred on God.¹⁵

There are two things to note here. First, 'vision' means being 'up-close and personal' with God. 'Knowing' here has the biblical

sense of an intimate relationship. Second, the Latin word for 'vision' means more than knowing an object 'out there.' It is knowledge in which what we know (and love) becomes part of us. As a result, my horizon is expanded. I come to see and love everything through God's eyes and with God's heart.

But what place does '*being seen*' have here, especially in the Scriptural presentation of faith in the context of the Risen Jesus? As Anthony J Kelly notes, citing NT Wright, the appearances 'bear the stamp of an objective and interpersonal encounter in which the subjectivity of the witnesses is laid bare, and their perceptions transformed.'¹⁶ While reflection on these appearances gives understandable attention to the disciples' 'seeing', Kelly suggests that what is often overlooked in those experiences is the 'quality of "being seen through" by him who sees into the heart.' The disciples of Jesus are present to Him both as they 'really 'are' but also as they are 'called to be.' And so 'the transparency of the disciples to the gaze of Jesus is a summons to conversion—especially at the point where faith had been lacking, or waned or even dead.'¹⁷

A more specific picture of the transformative gaze of Jesus is suggested by John of the Cross. The gaze of the risen Jesus is universally available and, notes Iain Matthews, 'guarantees the possibility of prayer.' It is Simon Peter in Luke's Gospel who, under the gaze of Jesus, offers the possibility for such prayer: on his first meeting with Jesus when, acknowledging his sinfulness, he is reassured by Jesus' 'do not be afraid' (Lk 5: 1-11); when Jesus sees through Peter's protestations of loyalty yet offers hope that he will grow strong (22:32); in Peter's denial and, undone by the gaze of Jesus, he weeps bitterly (22:62); the final cryptic report that the Lord had appeared to Simon (24:34). Matthews' summing up captures it perfectly:

'Risen indeed', and so alive in each person's history, gazing into each one's story, not just benignly, but effectively. As John's own history

had taught him, 'For God, to gaze is to love and to work favours.' His love acts. It makes us 'worthy and capable of .his love'. *His gaze is his love and his love does things.* 'God's gaze works four blessings in the soul: it cleanses her, makes her beautiful, enriches and enlightens her.'¹⁸

When we pray, when we turn to God in friendship, desiring him, no matter how bleak or dry it appears, something is always happening. God is 'taking us into himself and making us like himself.' How is prayer possible for me, at any time, no matter how empty it seems? 'Because 'Christ's loving gaze is constantly upon us, and he makes it possible.'¹⁹

The Face as Image for Others

As we seek to see God's face, it is Jesus, then, whose gaze of love draws us to Himself and transforms us. At the same time, Jesus is the ultimate filter given to us. He enables us to feel secure enough to be in the presence of the all holy God. Divine love adapts to our needs. In Jesus, with God close to us, we can gaze into the depths of divine holiness in wonder and love.

However, we get another insight into this in terms of the human face from Edward Schillebeeckx.

The human face in particular—man never sees his own face—already indicates that man *is directed towards others*, is destined *for others* and not for himself. The face is an image of ourselves *for others*.²⁰

This highlights a final aspect of 'seeing' the face of God. The face of Jesus is pointed to others—to the Father, to us, to the world. This is also true for us since we are made in the divine image. To seek and to see God's face is not just a solitary quest. We *share* the divine life which is about three persons in a relationship. It resonates in our attitudes and actions. Spirituality and morality are insepa-

ble. Levinas, for instance, has expanded our understanding of ethical life in response to the face of the [O]ther.²¹

Michael Downey points out that the life of the Trinity is not about propositions but *prepositions*—to, for, with, in, from. The Trinity is *for* each other and *for* others. That is the fuller meaning of seeing God's face. It is a knowing and loving which shares in the Trinitarian life and spreads out to others and to creation. As Andrew Louth notes, divinization (*theosis*) represents 'what is and remains God's intention: the creation of the cosmos that, through humankind, is destined to share in the divine life, to be deified.'²²

Conclusion

There are many other perspectives about sight and God that are beyond the scope of this discussion. There are, for instance, points of intersection between apophysis and the postmodern emphasis on God as 'other' and the sense of God's absence that run in parallel with modernity's loss of certainties. Again, as Neil Brown has discussed in this journal, we must learn from the 'new atheism.' We are reminded that the sincere quest for meaning and fullness of life may be involve a rejection of distorted, even of damaging, images of God. As Rahner reminded us, the expression of 'anguished atheism' may, in reality, be 'a sharing in the desolation of the cross.'²³

In reflecting on seeing and seeking God's face, this Jewish blessing may now have a deeper meaning for us and offer something final to ponder:

May Yahweh bless you and keep you.
 May Yahweh let his face shine on you
 and be gracious to you.
 May Yahweh uncover his face to you and
 bring you peace (Num. 6: 24-6)

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NOTES

1. This article is an expanded version of one topic in a series *Our Senses: Five Pathways to God* published in the *NZ Marist Messenger* August 2008-May 2009. My thanks to its present Editor.
2. This is explored in Rudolf Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* where he aims at developing an understanding of the 'numinous' which he also refers to as the 'Wholly Other.' This is later used by dialectical theologians post Bultmann and Barth to denote an objective absolute dependence on a transcendent being. This is to distance our discussion from any suggestion of rejection of analogy in speaking about God (as through the figurative use of the senses).
3. For instance, Elohim (Utterly different but with human qualities); El Shaddai (Almighty, alluding to the Home of the Gods in the mountains of the North).
4. Sensitivity to this Jewish tradition is recognized today by the use of 'Lord God' in Catholic and other Christian worship.
5. John C Murray, *The Problem of God*, (Yale University, 1964), 10.
6. *Summa Theologiae*, I, 12, 1.
7. Denys Turner, *Thomas Aquinas: A Portrait* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2013), 44.
8. Alister McGrath, 'The Cross, Suffering and Theological Bewilderment' in *The Passionate Intellect: Christian Faith and the Discipleship of the Mind* (Downers Grove, IL, Inter-Varsity Press, 2010), 60.
9. McGrath, 'The Cross', 60 citing Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, Thesis 20.
10. McGrath, 'The Cross', 64.
11. McGrath, 'The Cross', 66 citing *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 6-7.
12. McGrath, 'The Cross', 68.
13. See Paul Glynn, *Psalms: Songs for the Way Home* (Alexandria, NSW: EJ Dwyer, 1997), 38-40.
14. PHEME PERKINS, 'The Johannine Epistles' in R. Brown, J. Fitzmeyer, R. Murphy (eds), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989), 991.
15. 'Gloria enim dei vivens homo, vita est autem hominis visio dei.' *Adv. Haer.* Bk 4, 20.7.
16. See the full and insightful discussion of the polarities in the biblical presentation of faith and theology's suggestion of another mode of seeing/knowing by way of love as in the Gifts of the Holy Spirit in Anthony J Kelly, 'Faith as Sight? Toward a Phenomenology of Revelation', *Australian eJournal of Theology* 19:3, December, 2012, 180-194, at 183.
17. *Ibid.*, 183.
18. Iain Matthews, *The Impact of God: Soundings from St John of the Cross*, United Kingdom: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995. Emphasis added.
19. *Ibid.* 141.
20. Edward Schillebeeckx, 'What is humanity?' in *Christ: The Experience of Jesus as Lord*. Trans. John Bowden. (New York: Crossroad, 1980), 731-743, at 737. Emphasis in original.
21. See discussion in Terry A Veiling, "'For You Alone': A Reading of Transcendence and Relationship in Emmanuel Levinas." *Australian eJournal of Theology* 14, no. 1 (2009).
22. Andrew Louth, 'The Place of Theosis in Orthodox Theology' in Michael J. Christensen and Jeffrey A. Wittung (Eds.), *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Traditions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic): 32-44, at 34-5.
23. Karl Rahner, 'The Task of the Writer in Relation to Christian Living', *Theological Investigations*, vol. 8 (London: DLT, 1971), 113.

The mark of a healthy spirituality is that the person is seized by the tenderness and compassion of God for all his creatures. A sign of any unhealthy spirituality is a dichotomy between prayer and life, the natural and the supernatural, body and spirit, often characterized by a greater preoccupation with the devil and with evil than with the love and goodness of God, coupled with a curious inability of people to see the evil in the social, economic and political systems they so often support.

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