



# Ways of Knowing and Unknowing

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*This is the keynote lecture delivered by Fr. Laurence at this year's Mystics and Scientists conference on Western contemplative traditions.*

We are, each of us, the product of a union of opposites. Perhaps we enjoy, for an instant after our personal big bang, a fleeting experience of unity which haunts and entices us throughout our life, lost as quickly as it is glimpsed. Maybe for this reason many spiritual traditions see existence as a coming home, a *return*.

Immediately after the spark of consciousness has been struck, however, we fall into duality as our cells divide and multiply. Over a lifetime most of our somatic cells reproduce in a process by which they divide into two complete new cells which are identical to the original. This process of *mitosis* has six stages that take about an hour to complete. The sex cells play a more complex game called *meiosis* which takes longer and is rather different in the male and female. All of which interesting information illustrates the fact that from the beginning we are complicated because we are, quite literally, creatures of division. We begin with duality and we live thus even while we yearn for that lost glimpse of unity. Our bodies have two of most things: 'male and female he created them'. We spend much of our time looking for another to love and complete us or for an enemy to blame for our misfortune; even our brain has two hemispheres. Thought, which we assume is the distinctively human form of consciousness, revels in complexity working through endless comparison and analysis, thesis and antithesis, this and that, either/or.

Theologically this complementary dualism is expressed in two ways of knowing and seeking God – the One whom Aquinas called 'infinitely simple'. The *kataphatic* approach brings together *kata*, meaning to descend and *phatos*, *speech* – so it means to bring God down to the level at which we can speak about this reality that implicitly we cannot control in the dualistic or conceptual realm of consciousness. Yet to speak about God means we have to use *he* or *she* or *it* and we can at best approach and barely evoke the mystery by analogy and metaphor. Our language about God is essentially symbolic. Thomas Aquinas said that although we must use words to speak about God we use them in a quite different way than when we speak about human affairs.

The *kataphatic* approach however appears to say definite things about God or ultimate reality. This is true in other traditions, of course. In the Dzogchen school of Buddhism Nirvana is even described sometimes as the true self of the Buddha and in Hinduism certain schools are very explicit about the qualities of Krishna. In Christianity we say many things about the Trinitarian God. *He* is good, wise, just, loving, etc. Much ink and blood has been spilt over the meanings of these definitions over the centuries. But after listing the beautiful names and qualities of God Christianity, like the other religions, seems to get exhausted with the words and superlatives. It then glides into the opposite or complementary approach – the other side of the tunnel we are crawling, feeling our way through – which is the

*apophatic* which I will turn to soon. God is good, of course. But as, Jesus said to the rich young man 'why do you call me good. Only God is good' thereby illustrating that words cannot be fully relied on when we speak about ultimate reality.

## Approaches to Duality

All religions face this all-pervasive tension with duality. At the devotional level of religion, of course, it is not so much of a problem at all. In fact it is an advantage. In relating to a God 'out there', above, outside or separate from me I have an opportunity to appeal to it as a higher power that might be persuaded to improve my lot in life and enhance my wealth, health, or fertility. Even if this approach does not show good results, like buying lottery tickets every week or paying an insurance premium, it makes me feel better and more secure. The question of duality only rankles with those religious people who seek God at least equally between the *kataphatic* and *apophatic* sides. They are unsatisfied with an image of God unless it is they themselves, the human person, who are the image and can therefore achieve union with God by merging with the original of which they are a reflection or icon. These people may practice devotion and so at use dualistic metaphors or dramatisations for God in their prayer; but they are also more likely to have also discovered like Origen that

We do not pray to get benefits from God but to become like God.

This might give the impression that 'pure prayer' of this kind, as the early Christian monks called it (*contemplatio* or *theoria*), that detaches us from the dualistic understanding of God is the prerogative of the few, the illuminati of a spiritual elite. The Scriptures do not support this, however, and the modern religious landscape with its hunger for the mystical clearly illustrates it is not the case. More people are drawn to practice meditation, calling themselves 'spiritual not religious' than ever before in history. Spirituality is often understood as occupying the boundless realm of the *apophatic* and religion is widely distrusted as too exclusively or narrowly dualistic. Yet, even within the formal boundaries of religion, people whose way of worship might seem naively dualistic may have secretly touched into deep levels of the non-dual. They are not interested in this kind of discussion and while their outward appearance may seem dualistic their inner experience may be deeply unitive. They use the dualistic as a means of moving – in transcendence of the means – into the experience of unity. Although their description of their experience may be phrased in simplistic, dualistic language the visible fruits of their practice – love, tolerance, patience, joy – are evident for all to see. So, using these categories is necessary but at once more complex and simpler than it seems. We can never judge another's experience of the spiritual path or, if we do, we do so at our peril.

But, to return to the main topic, it is not only the tension between the dual and the non-dual but between this tension itself and something else which cannot ever be named. Beyond the dual and the non-dual there must be something else that includes them both. Is it the 'godhead' that Meister Eckhart provocatively said was deeper than God? Yet as the mischievous Eckhart evidently realised, to name the unnamable and describe the ineffable is to slide down the snake again into duality just when you thought you had reached home. Language and thought themselves are the problem. As in meditation when the mind is clear and transparent and the meditator realises there are no thoughts, the thought "I have no thought" is itself a thought. The big temptation – one we confront in every meditation period – is to conceptualise experience. The twin temptation to this is taking what we conceptualise and naming it at face value and stopping there. If we are not resolutely committed to the 'laying aside of thoughts', which is how the desert fathers defined prayer, we think that what we have said and elaborated upon *is* what it purports to be. Before long we are worshipping the idea or the image we have created. Human beings, particularly those whom Jesus called the learned and the clever from whom the mysteries were hidden, repeatedly mistake the image for the reality, the photo for the person, the intention for the deed. Hence the very force that drives us to think about God will hit the wall at some point. It is in the rebound, when it bounces back to us often with a feeling of failure, that we discover the *apophatic*.

## The Apophatic

In the prologue to his *Mystical Theology*, Pseudo-Dionysius captures this approach in the language of paradox and poetry:

*O Trinity  
beyond essence and beyond divinity and beyond  
goodness  
guide of Christians in divine wisdom,  
direct us towards mysticism's heights  
beyond unknowing beyond light beyond limit,  
there where the unmixed and unfettered and  
unchangeable  
mysteries of theology in the dazzling dark of the  
welcoming silence  
lie hidden, in the intensity of their darkness  
all brilliance outshining, our intellects  
overwhelming,  
with the intangible and invisible and illimitable:  
Such is my prayer.*

The word comes from *apophemi* which means to deny, so it is often called the *via negativa*. This approach to seeking God makes use of everything that the apophatic has said and then, admitting its inadequacy, simply dismisses it. In the same way, Tibetan monks pour their exquisitely complex sand mandalas which they have spent days or weeks making, into the river. Or as Aquinas wanted to burn as straw his *Summa Theologica* once he had truly seen the truth he had been writing about for so long. As in all creative work, however, each approach, the descriptive and the reductive, needs and complements the other. The best work draws excitingly close to an exact correspondence between thought and reality, image and original, but also recognises the essential gap. It achieves this by economy, excluding unnecessary elements; no slack is tolerated. Reality, which is what creativity worships, is lean. It is silent.

John Cassian said that in the work of meditation we 'renounce all the riches of thought and imagination' and come 'with ready ease' to the first of the Beatitudes poverty of spirit. Sustained detachment from the kataphatic constitutes much of the ascetical endeavour – the day-to-day training – of the spiritual

journey. Like losing weight, it has its difficult as well as its attractive side. John of the Cross wrote his exquisite poem on the *Dark Night* in order to describe a 'soul's conduct along the spiritual road that leads to the perfect union with God through love, insofar as it is attainable in this life.' He links darkness not to fear but to an apophatic suspension of ordinary ways of knowing, a transition or tunnel that will eventually lead us out into the blinding light of love. But in his prose writing he is notably harsh in satirising and rejecting the materialistic, consumerist, dualistic side of religion.

They weigh themselves down with over-decorated images and rosaries. Now they want this kind, now the next. Others you will see decked out in *agnusdeis* and relics and saints' names, like children in trinkets... What I condemn is possessiveness of heart and attachment to these objects. For this attachment is central to poverty of spirit which is intent only on the substance of the devotion.... Since true devotion comes from the heart and looks only to the truth of substance.... and any appetite for these things must be uprooted if some degree of perfection is to be reached.

His rejection of the addictive images of the kataphatic is really a rejection of the possessiveness and 'attachment' that arrests spiritual expansion. The apophatic often sounds quite harsh and radical for this reason and for the withdrawal symptoms it causes. It is often accused of being a kind of spirituality that 'ordinary people' are incapable of reaching. However the mystical writers have a quite opposite intention. They wish to affirm the universality of the contemplative dimension and that it is open to all who wish to follow it. It is of course a radical stage in personal and religious development. If few find it perhaps it is because it involves for all a painful experience of loss and separation in which they feel they are losing their faith or that God is abandoning them.

The *Cloud of Unknowing* is a much loved work of this school of prayer which adopts a gentler tone of encouragement and discernment but does not dilute the serious demand of the separation and commitment involved. The anonymous monastic author from the English Midlands is pragmatic and down-to-earth rather than theologically abstract. He even (like Cassian but unlike John of the Cross) makes a specific recommendation about a method of meditation, the monologistic prayer of one word or what John Main in the same tradition in the 20<sup>th</sup> century calls the 'way of the mantra'. The *Cloud* speaks about the 'work' needed to push thoughts of all kind, pious or otherwise, into the 'cloud of forgetting'. This includes the thought-perception that sometimes arises during an unusually lucid meditation "I have no thoughts". The thought 'I have no thoughts is a thought'. With this radical poverty and simplicity we are ready to enter into the cloud of unknowing which to some degree we will always inhabit and be limited to in this life. The author of the *Cloud* warns us that we will feel disoriented in this unfamiliar space and we will initially lose the sense of direction by which the rational, linguistic mind usually steers us. Without this navigation system we at first feel - and on occasions we are overwhelmed by it - as if we were adrift and clueless. But then from this disturbing state a new kind of knowing and understanding comes into play. It does not, however, override or destroy ordinary mental consciousness. The higher forms of knowledge are compatible with common sense – a reassurance one would expect from an English mystic. Moreover he warns, humorously, against the pseudo-contemplatives who abandon common sense by becoming egotistically infatuated with the transitory phenomena of their spiritual practice.

The counterfeit contemplatives tend to odd behaviour, 'sitting with their eyes fixed like a sheep, head lolling to one side as if they had a worm in their ear, to attract attention'. They are contemplative Pharisees controlled by the ego in religious dress. The true disciple, however, will be recognizable by modesty, honesty and good manners (*Chapter 53*)

Despite its radicalness, describing the *apophatic* is still in the realm of thought and so of duality. The next step is even more important to recognise in the descriptive or scholarly work of theology. However many research studies you conduct on meditation, however many books you write about mysticism there is always another and crucial step into pure, personal practice.

So there are really three ways of knowing – mental knowledge, the renunciation of mental knowledge and then the third which is better left unnamed but whose name we can only whisper: silence. 'Beyond unknowing' as Pseudo-Dionysius calls it. There is nothing so much like God as silence, Meister Eckhart dared to say.

## A Deeper Way of Knowing

If we spend too long in this labyrinth of defining terms we easily lose the thread of practice. Talking too much about enlightenment can similarly make us forget that the only way we can test our enlightenment is by our degree of loving. So, I would now like to turn to how this Christian and indeed universal tradition of the diverse ways of knowing is being lived and understood today. I believe we are already well into a new era where a new understanding of spirituality in relation to religion is evolving. This deeper and more integrated way of knowing seems set to become more widespread.

This new phase can only be understood in the light of the development of what Charles Taylor calls the 'secular age'. For many religious people today the secular is the enemy, an anti-Christ or a new manifestation of the godless. Properly understood, however, secularism does not mean a rejection of the religious but a new arrangement of the furniture of society in which religion can no longer expect or demand any privileged treatment or position. For some, especially in the west, this crisis denotes the terminal illness of religion even though the prevalence of religious belief globally is increasing. For some religious people, especially those with strong institutional loyalties, sadly and confusedly watching their churches empty and close, sold and turned into restaurants or DIY centres, secularism is a sickness in society that accompanies low morals and the decline of values. For other religious people, especially those who have reclaimed their mystical traditions this is an interesting time of renewal and liberation. Religion is being purified not eradicated.

Taylor shows that secularism that originates in the West is in fact a logical, self-universalising outcome of centuries of Christian belief and practice. It values, for example, the freedom and dignity of the individual as expressed in the teaching and example of Jesus. Even if it took a long time for the penny to drop, that this is the intent of his teaching, we can nonetheless celebrate the progress being made in putting his insight into social form. There is a long way to go but, the optimistic might say, we are getting there. If modern lifestyles, driven by excessively materialistic and external values, leave little time for religion it is not secularism *per se* that is to blame. Within the wisdom of their own tradition, modern secular-religious people can learn how to manage their time better to allow space for the spiritual – making time to meditate every day, for example, or make periodic retreats. A crucial area that is fomenting change and that often obscures the place of religion in a secular society is the revolution in sexual morality. The place where the sexual meets the spiritual, says Taylor, is very fraught today and urgently awaits the 'discovery of new paths to God'. (*A Secular Age* p. 767).

There is not space to explore these questions here but they need to be acknowledged as the context in which a new spirituality – new ways of understanding the different ways of knowing – is being born. For theologians and spiritual teachers like Karl Rahner and John Main the direction is clear: we are moving quickly to the place that Rahner foresaw when he said that the Christian of the future will be a mystic or there will be no Christians. The same point of view led John Main to see the urgent need for a contemplative renewal of the Church by re-connecting the grass roots membership to the mystical tradition and the contemplative dimension of the gospel. For Christianity

it is a shift (in emphasis) from pulpit to meditation cushion. The divorce between theology and prayer that began in the 12<sup>th</sup> century has reached its term.

The current situation is complex but clear enough. Many people in the secular age go in search of spirituality and find it, not in the churches which make too many demands of belief, orthodoxy, conformity and moral rules while delivering inadequately in wisdom, spiritual guidance and mentoring. The modern spiritual seeker usually finds what they are looking for outside religious institutions in ways that are attractive precisely because the 'content' or dogmatic baggage of religion has been filtered out. Experience replaces external authority – or seems to. Unsurprisingly religious people feel offended or angry at this and generally don't know how to respond. Should they become more cool and 'secular' or more religious and separate? Or, just wait and see?

## Secular Spirituality

Secular spirituality, at its most genuine, has much to recommend it, not least because it is open to all and does not use the threat of exclusion to enforce its rules. It is also orientated towards increasing happiness and well-being. Courses like Mindfulness Training have, like Transcendental Meditation a generation ago, caught the mood and hunger of people searching for ways to deal with the diseases of affluence, depression, addiction, stress, anxiety and loneliness.

Practical and straightforward in nature, this course provides an introduction to the practice of mindfulness and meditation. Delivered over three two-hour sessions we will explore the what, why and how of mindfulness as applied to daily life. No prior experience is necessary. (*A Mindfulness website*)

This kind of secular spirituality can often intensely exclude the religious element that may remain as part of many people's makeup. There can be a reverse exclusion at work here. One Mindfulness presenter asked his students where they found the important support systems in their lives. One said it was in her local church community. The presenter impatiently replied 'no, I mean real support'. The question, however, is not whether secular spirituality is valuable and necessary. Clearly it is. The deeper issue is what is the meaning of spirituality in a secular age where the very form of religion is being recast. Too narrow an understanding of 'secular spirituality' – or non-religious spirituality as it might be more accurately called – would cut us off from the full range of the different ways of knowing that do exist and are necessary for the fullness of the human potential.

The spiritual is not a separate category of investigation. It is embodied in the material and psychological realms of consciousness – how else could we know of it? It is nevertheless the transcendent dimension of consciousness giving access to the whole, the whole person, to the all in the all.

Some radical contemporary religious thinkers view the secular age as a time when old ways of understanding religion that were drawn from a pre-industrial era, have collapsed. What is needed, then, is not just a new language but a quite new understanding of religion appropriate to the world we have (rather unthinkingly it should be said) created with the modern tools of technology and social science. Simone Weil, from a more mystical perspective, saw this as the need for a 'new holiness' suited to our time.

These tools of the scientific method, seductive and powerful as they are, often ally with secular spirituality. Neurological and psychological research, for example, proves that meditation is good for you at all measurable levels. So who today except antiquarians needs the *Cloud of Unknowing* or John of the Cross? Such poetic, symbolic constructs of meaning are unnecessary baggage in a pluralistic, techno-scientific, individualistic world addicted to rapid change. They can be tolerated as highbrow entertainment or academic specialties. But they are not relevant to the needs of ordinary people in often desperate search for



healing and wholeness. This point of view deserves respect even if it frequently veils a raw prejudice against religion in any form.

Even this anti-religious position is one other form of modern secularism that has no problem with diversity of opinions. But perhaps people need more than this increasingly vocal if not majority position. A young professional woman told me recently how she had taken a Mindfulness Training course for eight weeks and benefited immensely from it. It clearly opened her to see, to know, in different ways. It changed the way she lived allowing her to enjoy again the simple pleasures of life, of healthy food and time with friends. She felt less driven and in her work she found she became less goal-obsessed and more sensitive to the process and her team. The 'mindfulness' exercises by which she came to this new frontier in her life and consciousness were standard and simple, familiar to other kinds of spirituality as preparatory practices leading the way to a deeper and more transformative practice. This in fact was what then happened to her. She realised she was 'looking for more' and identified it as the 'spiritual dimension'. She knocked on the big door of Google and it swung open to inform her of a retreat on Christian meditation which she attended. Since then she has started a daily practice of meditation, while maintaining her mindfulness routines in daily life, and joined a weekly meditation group.

Perhaps this is a parable of contemporary spirituality and not untypical of the re-integration of other ways of knowing into human development in a modern and secular society.

*What are you looking for?* These are the first words and the first of many questions that Jesus asks in the Gospel of John. The disciples to whom he puts the question respond with another question, from a different place, *where are you staying?* His question – and the response – accompanies us at all stages of our life. If we stop listening to this question of meaning and ultimate purpose and fail to turn our attention in its direction we live less consciously; we are less awake, alert, mindful and therefore less caring and compassionate. The disciples' response is similarly perennial. We are always looking for where this question of meaning, the 'something more', comes from. If we think we have finally found it – when we conceptualise and name it – we are in for a disappointment. As Gregory of Nyssa said to seek God is to find God but to find God is to be seeking him.

Is it for the relief of the symptoms of distress so prevalent in our society that we are looking? Certainly, and why not? We seek healing, health and wholeness quite instinctively. But as we find the way that heals and allows us to cope better we realise that we are still looking for more. The horizons of knowledge are always receding. The more we know the more we realise how little we know. Unknowing follows fast in the wake of knowing. We desire to find what we are looking for and we recognise it when we find it and so we also need to know what it is we are seeking. Perhaps the best articulation of what that is, is to be found in the sacred scriptures of the world. Read the Bible, then? Yes and the other scriptures. But what if we have lost the art of reading and interpreting them? Maybe they are, as some claim, the great oasis in the desert of modern scientism where we understand that what we are looking for is ourselves as fully human. Then it is important that we learn again how to read and teach them. A true reading of scripture is a kataphatic work but opens us soon to the apophatic and even to the unitive. In the reading of such texts it is not only the lector who does the reading because the text also reads the reader. The reader feels read, understood and penetrated by insights that do not come from intellectual knowledge or emotional consolation alone. A genuinely spiritual text has immense power to lead us beyond the dualities of the mind to the experience of unity in the heart.

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. (Heb 4:12)

There is no one, prescriptive way to initiate this deeply humanising experience. We start at different points of the circle

even though we are all equidistant from the centre. Certainly many will say, as the young woman I mentioned may say in a year or so, that meditation awakens in them the taste for scripture. Scripture like good poetry then creates the taste by which it is enjoyed. Those who for years have heard it delivered in a monotone from pulpits will open their eyes wide as they hear it as if for the first time. Cassian says that after he began to meditate he found it to be a harder practice than he had thought. But he knew something was happening because the scriptures opened themselves to him in new ways as if were the author of what he was reading. Scripture works mysteriously – and unpredictably. I also know of prisoners whose lives turned around on the sixpence of a short scripture passage glimpsed on a scruffy poster as they walked past the prison chapel and which led them in time to the contemplative dimension of faith.

Openness to the 'new paths to God,' as Charles Taylor calls them, is an aspect of the new era of religion and spirituality that we have entered. For religious institutions who have not yet fully embraced it, this can be frightening and threatening to their identity – an identity which may have been built for centuries on an exclusive claim to truth for which they were the sole holders of the keys. We have, as John Main said, to learn to let go of ourselves before the other appears – and with no pre-packaged guarantee that he will appear. This is faith, not magic, discipline not technique.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of the advent of a 'religionless Christianity'. And in 1943 Simone Weil, one of the greatest minds of the modern era, looking into the darkness of that time, said:

Today it is not nearly enough to be a saint, but we must have a saintliness demanded by the present moment, a new saintliness, itself without precedent. A new type of sanctity is indeed a fresh spring for invention. If all is kept in proportion and if the order of each thing is preserved, it is almost equivalent to a new revelation of the universe and of human destiny. It is the exposure of a large portion of truth and beauty hitherto concealed under a thick layer of dust, the new holiness." This amazing statement, this spiritual vision, is just what we need when we look into the black hole of our present predicament. It's the hope we need for our own dark age. ... (Waiting for God)

So what about this new holiness? What is it? What's new about it? Surely holiness is holiness, saints are saints and always have been. Not quite. For Simone Weil the specific characteristic of this new holiness is an explicit sense of universality. In the acknowledged saints of the past, there was doubtless a greater sense of universality than prevailed in the society around them. It's part of holiness to have this sense of interconnection, interdependence and basic tolerance and compassion for all. But it was often largely implicit. Even St. Francis, one of the most universally minded of saints, was bound by his culture, his time, his politics and his religion. It would have been hard for medieval saints to say, as the Second Vatican Council later did, that they rejected nothing that was true and holy in other religions. Modern holiness, however, according to Simone Weil knows that the universe is a country, and that for the truly spiritual man or woman 'it is our only country here below'. It is this vision of holiness with the explicit universality of a global consciousness that is our way today towards peace, our way to a love of country that is not nationalistic, patriotism without nationalism, local identity without aggression towards your neighbour, and religious belief without intolerance or prejudice.

In ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia the divine was felt to be immanent in nature. To see the sun was to see God. This was a way of knowing but it was challenged by the Hebrew insight that the sun was a servant of God, a creature, and that 'the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows forth his handiwork' (Psalm 19). There were many gods but only one true God. By the path of reason the Greeks similarly de-mythologized

the world. The disenchanting of the modern world that Weber noticed began long before the modern era. Plato broke a barrier of knowing when he understood that

Had we never seen the stars, the sun and the heaven, none of the words we have spoken about the universe would ever have been uttered. But now, the sight of day and night and the months and the revolutions of the years have created number and have given us a conception of time; and the power of inquiring about the nature of the universe; and from this source we have derived philosophy than which no greater good ever was or will be given by the gods to mortal man (*Timaeus*)

### III.

#### Where Now?

To conclude I would like to speculate about where this new trajectory of religion and spirituality may be taking us.

Economically and socially the more we undergo globalisation the more we assert our local identity. Conversely, the greater the diversity we encounter in human fellowship the more we seek the common ground. Clearly the excessively materialistic values of our time are unsustainable. Spiritual values need to be recognised and then interiorised if we are to recover balance, the balance and moderation on which all health depends. There is no exclusive prescription for this and so all religions must plunge deep into their own traditions in order to find the medicine appropriate for the sick patient. The generic medicine is meditation, the simplest and most universal access to wisdom that humanity has discovered.

Religion will be purified and reformed in this contemplative process. The virus of perfectionism, which prevents its victims from flourishing in true freedom, will be expunged. The effects of clericalism which maintains a power structure built on models of domination rather than equality in love will also be reformed. Religion will retain its belief systems, scriptures and rituals although a spring-cleaning by a spiritually mature laity will no doubt simplify and reduce them. Words and thoughts, rules and images will remain but would no longer require the castigation that John of the Cross gave them in the 17th century.

Or so we hope; so we may imagine.

As long as we are embodied beings we will need language and thought. As we saw at the beginning of this essay, our bodies, which ground and embody the mind in a physical and psychological universe, began with a process of division.

Maybe within this process there is hidden a deeper process of unification. Such is the paradox that science has found to exist deep in the structure of matter. This way of starting the journey of consciousness leaves us with an inextinguishable aspiration for wholeness and simplicity which we may take long to understand as our greatest source of meaning and happiness. Human life may be a return to its source but we return home as a very different aggregate of cells.

Home, in the Christian vision, is the vision of God – *theoria* or *contemplatio* – and it is what we are meant for. Perhaps the religious revolution we are passing through is simply a refreshing of the metaphor of vision (and of God). I remember learning about the beatific vision as a boy in religion class and feeling overwhelmed. Aeons sitting in hierarchical ranks staring at a distant divinity on an elevated throne? Better than the alternative, but still not thrilling. I was not taught what Aquinas thought it meant – not a dualistic, voyeuristic experience at all. For him the vision of God is not theatre but communion. It is the perfect vision of things as they actually are. It is the complete satisfaction of all desire, simultaneously, and therefore beyond our imagining. Above all it is a 'community of supreme delight' because

eternal life consists of the joyous community of all the blessed, a community of supreme delight, since everyone will share all that is good with all the blessed. Everyone will love everyone else as himself and therefore will rejoice in another's good as in his own. So it follows that the happiness and joy of each grows in proportion to the joy of all. (*sermon*)

It is impossible to limit knowledge to a closed, individualistic system. True knowledge, as distinct from information, is never a private possession. Yet it is hard imaginatively to separate the act of knowing from that of seeing and it is hard to say what *seeing together* means. So, perfect knowing is unthinkable. It involves our being perfectly known. It is not *looking at* but *seeing*, even *seeing with*, because

Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.  
(1 Cor 13:12)

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