

Belief & Sensing the Invisible

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On the island of lost voices, in a forgotten room of an isolated house, Lucy finds the Magician's book. Thumbing through it she encounters a number of spells that are tempting to perform, but she resists until she comes across a good spell: a *spell to make hidden things visible*. As she read it through she was aware it was working "because as she spoke, colours came into the capital letters at the top of the page and the pictures began appearing in the margins" (p.176). When she finishes she thinks "I must have made everything visible... There might be lots of other invisible things hanging about this place. I'm not sure I want to see them all." Then she hears soft, heavy footfalls coming along the corridor outside and turned around only to see Aslan "solid and real and warm" (p.177). "Oh, Aslan," said she, "it was kind of you to come." "I have been here all the time," said he, "but you have just made me visible."

The passage I quoted from C.S.Lewis's *Voyage of the Dawn Treader* keeps returning to me as I have reflected upon how we, human beings, are continually negotiating various invisibilities. I began by thinking through what the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, himself interested increasingly in the relationship between the visible and the invisible, calls 'intentional transcendence'. That is, the way the intentional gaze completes the form of an object not entirely visible. We never see a cube as such, for instance; we only see at most three sides and our gaze 'completes the rest' by make what is not visible visible *as an idea*. This notion of how we make the invisible visible is deepened considerably by contemporary science. Take multiverses, for example. Their existence has been demonstrated by some of the most imaginative people alive today – quantum physicists, cosmologists, and pure mathematicians – on the basis of solutions to Einstein's General Theory of Relativity and to problems raised by the operations of gravity, the nature of dark matter, the instability of 'nothingness' because of virtual particles, and the fact (I emphasize 'fact') that there appears to be more matter in the universe that can be accounted for. This is all mind-boggling stuff. What is suggested is that there are multiple, an uncountable number, of other universes, not existing parallel with this one, but existing simultaneously with this one. The Big Bang at the origin of this universe, our universe, may only be one of many millions of Big Bangs issuing from an infinitely dense singularity. Other Big Bangs might be occurring all

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the time as multiverses bubble up and dissipate, endlessly. To use the language of scientists as eminent as Stephen Hawkins and Stephen Weinberg, there's a "chaotic inflation". Sciences leading current investigations into the nature of things are treating the very molecules of emotions and the dark energies of the material. And none of this is visible as such. They are made visible through highly abstract and computerised mathematics. The point here: we live amidst any number of invisibilities that are made visible for us. They are made visible through the power of the imagination.

Similarly, increasing attention in neuroscience to the complexities of neurotransmitters with respect to thought, feeling and the autonomic regulation of our bodies, has shown how possibly only 5% of anything that goes on within us is well lit enough to become consciousness. 95% of our responding to the world is not available to us. So, in the light of this new turn to the invisible I want to reflect upon theological practices of sensing the invisible. "For the invisible things of [God] from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead" (Rom. 1.20). But how are they "clearly seen"? This is a huge field, and I do not want to lose us in abstractions. So I'm going to give you one example of this sensing with respect to teaching the doctrine of the Christian faith.

The creed Cyril of Jerusalem taught in the mid-fourth century was not the Nicene Creed even in the form it was given at the Council, but it is close. The creed itself was not written down. It was to be memorized and internalised by those about to be baptised in order that they might recite it before the congregation at their baptism. By this act of committing the creed to memory, the Christian faith was to be internalised. It was not a matter simply of imparting knowledge, but participating in an ongoing understanding of the teachings of the faith through the practise of that faith – that is, enfolding one's experience of the world within the tenets of its teachings: being formed in Christ. Cyril's lectures on the creed were first orations. Later they were transcribed and circulated, but we are unsure when and how. They were delivered on or close to the site of Golgotha because Cyril continually emphasizes the location of his teaching. Place is important or becomes important. The

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metropolitan bishopric of Palestine was Caesarea, not Jerusalem. But Constantine recognised the powerful symbolics of place: with Constantinople as the executive heart of the empire and Jerusalem as its spiritual heart. Cyril, though much younger than Constantine, concurred. Place mattered (literally) – and what is mattered or materialized was that a presence not seen: holiness. With Cyril, Jerusalem was not simply a place of historical importance. It was a place of theological importance because of the universal salvation that had been won here by Christ's crucifixion. It was also understood as the place where the great transformation would occur with the coming of the New Jerusalem, at the end of time. This place, then, for Cyril evoked things not present. Time here was multidimensional: liturgies translated the present city, re-established by imperial patronage and the building of the Basilica, into the ancient city of king David, the city where the great Christ events of death, burial and resurrection occurred and the city that was to come down from above at the consummation of the age. Time zones here were crossed, recrossed, each echoing the other. As such, Jerusalem was a place set apart; an intensification of the holy. It was a site of God's presence, of sacramental and ontological value. It was a Stargate.

Cyril's teaching of the faith was conducted within the church. Material space – built as a magnificent basilica by Constantine and housing both Golgotha and the Resurrection tomb. It was a place where the physical bodies of the communicants, the city as a civic and military corporation, the Eucharist and the theological body of Christ overlapped. In this place, prior to their baptism, Cyril would lecture those who wished to become Christians. On eighteen occasions during Lent he expounded to them the meaning of the articles of the creed. It was a teaching, like Lucy's, in which he made the invisible visible. Each lecture moves towards a concluding prayer of praise, lifting the audience from the local to the universal and Trinitarian. As Cyril puts it in introducing the course of lectures: "Prepare thine own heart for reception of doctrine, for fellowship in holy mysteries" [16]. The doctrine is part of a reception into a holy fellowship; a reception of the invisible. And although it will require a voluntary and intellectual assent, it is received into the heart. As with the sacrament of baptism itself, the teaching and what is taught are means, vehicles for grace. The teaching given was a therapeutic operation upon the senses, the mind and the heart,

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forming them as believers. “Thou art transplanted henceforth,” he tells them, “among the spiritual...made partaker of the Holy Vine.”

This rhetorical and theological enfolding moves the recipient into an anticipation of their future state – “[a]ngels shall dance around you”. The Catechumens are brought by language operating upon their imaginations and resonating through the cavernous basilica into the very heart of the creed and its theology - though not one of them has been given either at this point. They are introduced into the way the creed and its theology are lived, before the content of what always remains ‘holy mysteries’ is disclosed. Cyril inaugurates a pedagogical regime; an order, a discipline that educates and structures sense and sensibilities. His rhetoric is both performative and generative. It conjures not only descriptions of the eschatological state – “Henceforth thou art planted in the invisible Paradise” and “enrolled in the armies in heaven” – but what I would call a communal desire as what is experienced in socially shared. The bishop sat on his throne in the basilica with the candidates around him listening and entering imaginatively and emotionally into his vision of the unseen kingdom. The bishop and the laity are bonded in the interpersonal communication that operates, in, through and with the all materiality of the architectural space, upon the soul as the breath of God; the soul as the image of God’s Spirit. Sound circulates, enters those who are receptive, and shapes thoughts and feelings. As such, this speech-act, in the basilica built upon the place where Christ was crucified and the tomb from which he was resurrected, anticipates the sacramental communion by bringing those who are listening into a foretaste of the body of Christ and the New Jerusalem.

Cyril repeatedly emphasizes the voice of the instructor. As I said the creed promised to the would-be neophytes is delivered orally and they are explicitly told not to write it down. In the final lecture they are told to tell no one of the instruction they have received. In the catechesis which followed their baptism, conducted throughout Holy Week, and an example of which is found in Cyril’s much later work *Mystagogic Catechesis*, they are also explicitly reminded not to reveal the teachings and practices of the church concerning the sacramental ‘mysteries’ to those outside the church. The emphasis on the vocal and the voiced reaches its climax at the Easter Eve Vigil and

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the rite of initiation. In the darkness before dawn, those at the second stage (between catechumen and believer), those being illuminated, assemble in the basilica and face west towards the cave of the crucifixion. From out of the darkness of Golgotha a voice calls upon them to stretch forth their arms and renounce Satan. It is only when they have done this that they can then turn east towards the rising sun, and the site of the resurrection tomb (the Anastasis). After this they walk towards the baptistery and strip naked. This immersion within the visible materiality of the liturgy is continued as their bodies are anointed with holy oil and they descend into the waters. On being baptized they emerge and are given a white robe, then anointed again on the forehead, ears, nostrils and chest, this time with a perfumed holy oil. The initiation rite sought to be 'awe-inspiring'; that is evoke human wonder at the incomprehensible depths of the godhead. Throughout his lectures, Cyril pays attention to the emotive power of the liturgy in which all the senses are engaged. The pilgrim known as Egeira, who witnessed the Easter liturgies in Cyril's time around 380, describes the interior of the cathedral, observing its ornate decoration: the gold, the silks, the embroidery, sacred vessels, candles, candelabra, incense, the cries and groans of the congregation, the recitation of Scripture and the singing of Psalms and hymns as they encounter that which transcends them. Listening to and following the voice is part of an elaborate, theatrical, participative and profoundly theological pedagogy. The teaching is governing by an overriding sense of the apophatic and an experience of that which cannot be spoken and cannot be known.

What I am emphasizing here the way the theological teaching engages with material culture, human sensing and affections, the sacredness of the place, the complex temporal interweave of the place and the ecclesial space, encouraging participation in that which is not seen. Making the invisible visible. Participation in the divine is made visceral through sensory reception: hearing the voice of the speaker, seeing the light of candles, being touched by the sign of the cross and the water of baptism, tasting the salt given as a preliminary to admission, and smelling the scents of olive oil, incense and the perfumed oils. The senses receive these impressions internally as they remain foundational for any knowledge or truth, but Christians were taught their spiritual significance. And so, in what we might term a

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pedagogy of the senses, the spices of the baptismal ointment release the allusive and enchanting scent of Paradise that reforms the senses and the soul. This involves “a total renewal which brings about a return to the original paradisiac state.” We are told in other Patristic sources that this was the incorruptible smell of creation only known to Adam and Eve before the Fall – of flowers and trees, of rain water and fruit, of feathers and fields: the incense of the Kingdom. The invisibility of fragrance was understood (and being understood recognised) both as the presence of God and the odour of sanctity. To smell was to participate in that sanctity, and the scents of worship heralded the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit. Participation *is* revelation. Through the process of sanctification, the liturgy taught not only *how* to experience God with the body, but further, *what* to experience. Imaginations are fired, liturgical movements are performed, and the world outside (its seasons, its history, light and darkness) is enfolded into the world inside, written on the body and formed within the heart. The episcopacy of Jerusalem developed an elaborate stationary liturgy in which holy sites and churches erected on or near them formed the basis for ceremonial processions that publicly and literally took possession of the topography beyond the Constantinian basilica: Processions going through the streets of Jerusalem and moving from one sacred site to another were an essential part of the presence and visibility of Christianity. Jerusalem’s urban space became ritualized in this way. With Cyril we see the mobile frontiers between the historical sites, the reading and exposition of the Scriptures, doctrinal teaching, ecclesial liturgies and spiritual operations.

The focus of his pedagogy is that the sensed becomes the spiritually sensuous: sweat glistening in the pre-dawn darkness of Good Friday in a procession of a thousand candles streaming down from the Mount of Olives to the garden of Gethsemane. Sweat on the foreheads and the bared arms of those enrapt. And the pre-baptism anointing of olive oil on naked flesh, smoothed into intimate spaces. The point of the teaching then is to glorify the Lord, not to explain him: “For we explain not what God is but candidly confess that we have not exact knowledge concerning Him. For in what concerns God to confess our ignorance is the best knowledge.” Cyril’s teaching is orientated not primarily towards knowledge (though there will be

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understanding), because God is the Unsearchable and His works incomprehensible. Cyril's teaching is oriented towards a material, pastoral and liturgical pedagogy that finds its fulfilment in the immaterial imaginings, even pregnant silence, of worship. "Ascend, I say, in imagination even unto the first heaven, and behold there so many countless myriads of Angels. Mount up in thy thoughts, if thou canst, yet higher; consider, I pray thee, the Archangels, consider also the Spirits; consider the Virtues, consider the Principalities, consider the Powers, consider the Thrones, consider the Dominions", but "inquire not curiously into [God's] nature or substance".

What I have sought to do in this brief paper is introduce you to how the senses engage invisibility. The question is: are there different forms of invisibility? To close let us look briefly at the gospel passage we had read to us from John. We enter an incident that occurs following an account of Jesus praying publicly after his baptism. "Father, glorify thy name." Then came a voice from heaven saying, "I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again." The people therefore that stood by, and heard it, said that it thundered; others said, "An angel spoke to him." Jesus answered and said, "This voice came not for me, but for your sakes." It is well known that one of the major themes in John's gospel concerns believing and its relationship to seeing and hearing the gospel preached. The theme culminates in the penultimate chapter of the Gospel with the scene between Christ and doubting Thomas and the statement: "blessed are they that have not seen and have believed." What is interesting in this passage is the way the same occurrence can constitute different forms of believing and seeing with respect to the invisible and the visible.

One group perceives thunder and believes the phenomenon to be a natural one. Another group perceives something (perhaps the same thunder) but believes it is an angel speaking to Jesus alone (for presumably they themselves hear only a noise). And finally Jesus and the Johannine narrator hear the voice of God – a voice which, on Jesus's statement, was available for all to hear since it was a voice for others, not himself. It is not a difference in interpretation which separates the three understandings of what had occurred, rather it is a difference in perception; a difference in the quality of perception and belief-informed intentionality. There is an alleged hierarchy in this quality; with Jesus and whoever heard the voice of God

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perceiving more truly than those who believed an angel had spoken or that it had thundered. And this quality of perception I would relate to the imagination; for it is how something is imaged for us, imagined, that governs what is perceived and understood.

The invisible things of God are never divorced from the sensed, the experienced and the practised. Like Lucy in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, we who imagine in our forms of faith are only making visible an Aslan who is here all the time. The invisible is inseparable from the visible, participating in the mysteries is a material phenomenon. The invisible is not a 'going beyond' but an 'entering more deeply into' the visible. Faith is does not demand a sacrifice of reason, but an entrustment to those invisibilities, those very ordinary invisibilities like imagination and the fields of virtual particles that, for quantum physics, compose the material and make multiverses possible. But the making visible of all invisibilities depends upon the one same activity: the imagination.