**The Great Beyond**

***The Conventional Path***

“Why can’t I find the God that you seem to have found?” the medical professor in Fiji asked me at the end of our three-hour conversation over dinner. He had been raised a Baptist until, at the age of 16, he gave up on his church, although he admitted that he had spent many years since then exploring theology and pondering the philosophical arguments for and against a god. I don’t remember how I answered his plaintive question, but in retrospect I wish I had replied: “Because you’re looking in the wrong places.”

How do any of us find the divine, that mystery that we so easily call “God”? My friend’s initiation, like my own and so many others’, probably began on his mother’s lap with simple prayers. Mine included an early introduction to many small rituals: blessing myself with holy water on entering the church, genuflection before the tabernacle with the faint glow of the sanctuary lamp alerting us to the presence of the Lord, the sound of bells rung at the consecration, and the smell of incense on special occasions. We may facilely dismiss all this as fond memories of an outdated piety, but collectively they offered me a sense of the sacred, an invitation to explore the mystery of the divine.

Meanwhile, we had to endure the tedium of learning our catechism during elementary and high school years. We Catholics memorized definitions of this God, the wondrous figure of whom we learned in our earliest years. Some of us learned much more: the pocketbook formulation for the Trinity, the different choirs of angels, the names of the most prominent archangels. And this is not even to mention the intricacies of scripture and the history of the church. Nearly all of what is called our religious education was cognitive, concerned with dogmas and distinctions, with a touch of scriptural and church history thrown in. For the most part the religious instruction did little to heighten our awareness of the mysterious being we had been introduced to from our earliest years. “Fides quaerens intellectum,” Aquinas called this dynamic, acknowledging the human need to map out in conceptual terms our encounter with the divine. Still, it’s hard to imagine how the Baltimore Catechism and its replacements over the years could have inspired anyone to surrender to the mystery of God.

As we grew older, some of us found reason enough to continue to search for the God to whom we had been introduced from the earliest days of our lives. There might have been experiences that somehow confirmed the power of that mystery in our lives. Many of us decided that, whatever problems we might have had with our church, we were hooked on the quest. Let’s not call it “brainwashed,” because our attachment was rooted in deeper places in our being than the mind. Others, for whom the church and what it taught (or what it practiced) presented an insuperable obstacle, opted out and pursued their own path to the One inviting them on. Some might have become avowed Buddhists, others would label themselves agnostics, and many more could have simply called themselves “spiritual” (as distinguished from “religious”) as they let the sweep of their lives carry them on. Here, I suppose, is where my Baptist friend and I took different roads, even if the roads probably led to the same destination: a cliffside.

Before we track that path to the cliffside, we might pause to reflect on a curious fact that has been noted time and again. Catholics might shed their religion, but the imaginative associations with this faith–those bells and the sanctuary lamp and the Christmas eve mass–are not so easily dispensed with. The haunting symbols of the rituals that were supposed to lead people to the brink of transcendence so often remain unextinguished. Isn’t that why Andrew Greeley and others could write so convincingly of the Catholic imagination and its enduring hold over such former Catholics as Madonna and Lady Gaga? We may be able to scrap the catechism, but erasing the imaginative part of our upbringing–that very part that once led us to the divine–is not so easily done. “Once a Catholic, always a Catholic,” as the saying goes.

***At the Cliffside***

Whether we were introduced to the faith at our mother’s side or not, we all sooner or later end up at the cliffside. In the course of life’s journey we may spend time wandering through the glens and meadows or venture into the heavily wooded areas, but invariably we will come to the edge of the cliff that drops off into the mist below or looks out into a space beyond. Up to this point we may have been following well known routes or charting our journey by GPS or the fold-out maps that let us know where we are. When we get to the cliffside, however, normal navigational tools are useless. The rational thinking that brings us through the (two-dimensional) part of our life doesn’t work any longer. We come to a place that drops off and looks out to the unknown. Let’s call it the Great Beyond.

We may be brought to the edge of the cliff in any number of ways. It may be a peak experience–the exhilaration at the beauty of a musical piece, the sense of wonder at a stunning sunset, or an overwhelming sense of joy and peace. It could be the sudden realization that the world is so much deeper and more complex than we had known, or a sense of wonder about the meaning of our life. George Steiner, the noted intellectual, found hints of transcendence in the wonders of music. Francis Collins, director of the Human Genome Project tasked with mapping out the 3 billion letters into a DNA instruction book, reached the brink when he was forced to admit to himself that the science to which he had dedicated his life was powerless to answer such questions as ‘Why am I here?’ and ‘What is the meaning of life?’ But the same questions could be triggered when a person closely examines the veins on a leaf and is drawn to ask why these patterns. Anything that brings us to a sense of our own smallness and the wonder beyond will do.

Life can bring us to the brink in other ways, too–through what the theologian John Haught calls a “shipwreck experience”–the death of a spouse or good friend, a sense of failure and apparent meaninglessness in our life, the reaction to suffering. Such tragic experiences can stop us short, interrupt our normal patterns, and bring us face to face with the unknown. But the “shipwreck” can be much less dramatic, as when a person confronts the lack of purpose in his or her own life and finds that life hung on the shoals.

These cliffside experiences are much more common than many people think. But why not? We’re all programmed, contrary to what we may have been told in catechism class, to become minor mystics. Therese Lisieux and John of the Cross are not a breed set apart from the rest of us mere mortals. Mystical moments are common enough, and not just among devout Christians, or Buddhists who have cultivated the art of submerging beneath the workaday world to find a sense of oneness and peace. Even free-thinkers, atheists, and unrepentant self-promoters can have cliffside experiences, sometimes repeatedly.

Our maps fail us when we reach the cliffside. Once there, we can only stand and peer out at the mists beyond. At the edge of the cliff, we are summoned to take one step forward and let ourselves fall. What lies below and beyond? we wonder. Uncharted territory for sure (after all, our GPS system doesn’t work here). The sense of beauty and wonder and freedom and goodness that brings us to the cliffside in the first place beckons us on. Trust your instincts and let go. Take the plunge. Let yourself drop. Surrender to the mysterious unknown and let it envelop you. There’s nothing to be afraid of.

***Different Responses***

It’s much easier for a person to take the plunge when that individual has been gently led through life by someone he or she has learned to trust. It’s a help when life has generally proved beneficent and one’s guides have been credible. If the guides assure me there is a heated pool somewhere down there concealed by the mists, I’ll let go and allow myself to be swallowed by those mists in the hope that I’ll have a soft landing.

But there are those who feel they have been cheated by life; what was expected to be meaningful journey has become a pointless exercise. They’ve been deceived so often that even if they do reach the cliffside (and most of us do at some point), it’s hard for them to trust the voice that urges them to step off and surrender themselves to a gracious power that will carry them gently to the bottom. It’s no surprise that they can’t bring themselves to leap.

There is another kind of person whose face is buried in his GPS and whose trust lies in coordinates. He is a creature of the map–one who lives in the two-dimensional world that can be plotted and laid out in grids. He is the rational man, careful and calculating, one who will never allow himself to be taken in by the irrational. If he should find himself on the cliffside, he takes one look down, shudders with repulsion, and reverses direction to find territory in which he can continue to rely on his beloved GPS. “Lemmings all,” he scornfully mutters as he watches the others take their leap. He dismisses them as victims of their own misguided beliefs and fanciful projections. If only they had the good sense to stick to their GPS and maps, as he has!

But there is yet another response. This is the one who has stumbled to the cliffside on his own, without the benefit of a kindly guide who whispers encouraging words into his ear. He is intrigued by this strange place and by the mists that prevent him from seeing what is beneath him or off in the distance. He has a strong sense of the beguiling mystery, but he doesn’t know what to call it. He is enchanted but not so sure what lies beyond. He has no vision of a heated pool below to comfort him. He is reluctant to refer to anything beyond as the divine. Still he is fascinated. He might call himself an agnostic or less, but he remains at the edge entranced by what might lie below and beyond. I sometimes wonder whether my ex-Baptist friend might be numbered in this group.

***The Risk of Religion***

Religion is meant to lead us to the brink of the cliff where we face the divine mystery–the mystery we all call God (as Aquinas would say). The purpose of religion is to challenge us to expand our consciousness so that we find the cliffside and know what it is. Beyond this, religion encourages us to respond to the mystery. It may do this in providing stories, both comforting and challenging, that can help us take that step off the cliff. “Heated pool” stories are one way of assuring us that the beneficent power will not abandon us as we drop. Another is the comforting memories of those moments when we felt closest to the mystery in the center of our life–perhaps at an Easter vigil liturgy or during a prayer weekend.

As Karen Armstrong reminds us in her book, *The Case for God*, religion has always offered its devotees a chance to practice the cliffside experience. The religious initiations and other rituals were meant to keep before devotees’s eyes the mystery with the awe, and sometimes terror, that it inspired. The rites were to sharpen their eyes for the trip to the cliffside, while the stories were to reassure them when they reached it. Don’t we all need symbols, Armstrong asks, to evoke wonder and awe?

Yet religions, because they are human activities, can not refrain from naming things–even the mystery that lies beyond the cliffside. As incomprehensible as it may be, the divine mystery must have a name if we are to speak of it with one another. And so it is that we have learned to call this mystery God, or Zeus, or Ra, or whatever other name people might have given it in the various religious traditions. Each religion offers abundant stories about this god, stories that are not to be taken literally but to awaken in us a sense of the greatness of the One Beyond. What can we know with certainty about this mystery, after all? We in our age are literalists, Armstrong reminds us, and so we read stories (*mythoi*) that were intended to expand our imagination and open them to the transcendent as fixed historical or rational statements about this god. What were intended to open us up to the mystery can have the effect of limiting this mystery, boxing in the divine, and leading us to believe that we know much more about God than we really do. Oddly enough, this dogmatism is a return to the GPS and the maps–a retreat from the cliffside into the two-dimensional, just like the rationalists. It’s ironic that some of the most literal-minded Christians and the most determined atheists should share so much in common.

We can’t help but make conceptual statements about the most indefinable of things. We are human after all. So it is that we peer into the mist and make all manner of pronouncements about the divine mystery. We argue whether to call it a “he” or “she,” Fr. William O’Malley observes, when we ought to be wondering whether it is a “who” or a “what.” We call it powerful and just and loving, before we realize that these predicates collide with one another, thus concealing as much as they reveal. We use the imagery of our sacred books to shed light on the divine mystery, forgetting as we do that the language is as metaphorical as it is inspired. We struggle to formulate concepts that hint at what god is only to find ourselves trapped into a literal understanding of these same concepts. Every dogma, as important as it might be, should come with a label reading: Use sparingly; this can be dangerous to the belief of the ordinary user.

***Learning to Live with Uncertainty***

Christians, like adherents of any religion, must speak of the divine, so we must use assertions in doing so, but we must be careful not to think that we can define God. Dogmas serve an important purpose in the Catholic Church as in any other religion: they stake out the boundaries of what we as a community think we know about God so that we can collectively continue our search for the divine. Dogmas are justifiable as long as we are prepared to do what Aquinas did–admit that these are deep waters we have waded into and that what we offer is only a crude hint of what the God we reverence truly is. If we want to remain true to the divine mystery, we must resist the temptation to think that we can capture God in the butterfly net of doctrine.

The temptation of the church, especially in our times, is to go ever further to build up a strong doctrinal core and hold fast to this dogma to avoid fragmentation of the church, while providing believers with the certainty that many of us crave. It is tempting for the church to wish to plug all the doctrinal holes. Yet, we can and must live with a measure of uncertainty if we are to preserve the sense of mystery that leads us to the sacred. What, for instance, do we really know of the afterlife? Why do we feel compelled to make strong assertions on the nature of heaven and hell and judgment on the basis of literal interpretations of scripture? Wouldn’t it be wiser to acknowledge our ignorance, using scriptural passages judiciously?

The future of the church does not rest primarily with its dogma, as necessary as dogma might be. After all, relatively few are drawn to the cliffside by the doctrinal content of the church. For most of us, it’s the religious stories that fascinate and lead us on: Moses’ encounter with the divine in the burning bush, Jonah’s futile attempt to escape his mission to the people of Nineveh, the victory of a young shepherd over an over-sized enemy warrior, to say nothing of the memorable gospel stories. These tales capture our imagination, as they were intended to do, and guide us to the spot where we can plunge into the bowels of the divine mystery.

In addition to these stories, there is the rich symbolic life of the church for those of us who were raised in the church from infancy. It is those rituals and symbols of transcendence, pointers to the divine, that lead us to the cliffside early in our lives and later on. The sprinkling of holy water on the casket promising unspoken blessings, the interplay of darkness and light in the Easter Vigil liturgy that dramatizes all we know about life, the sponsor’s hand on our shoulder at Confirmation. These symbols can’t be shaken easily, as practicing and non-practicing Catholics have long attested.

***What Can We Conclude?***

Our church, as Vatical II made clear, must forever be reforming and renewing itself if it hopes to effectively carry on its mission in the world. In our day the agenda for the renewal of the church should be guided in part by these major thrusts.

First of all, when assessing itself and initiating reform, the Catholic Church would do well to recognize the importance of its rich heritage of symbols and rituals. While we can all recognize the powerful impact of the liturgy of an earlier pre-Vatican era, we need not restore these liturgical practices wholesale to achieve this end. The church’s symbolism and ritual is by no means inextricably linked to the old Latin mass, Gregorian chant, Bach and Handel pieces, and the pipe organs that thundered in the churches of this earlier era. We need not turn back the calendar to rekindle a sense of wonder in the church. Isn’t the Easter Vigil liturgy, with its thrilling use of light and darkness and the readings that lead us through salvation history, an enormous improvement on what we had before? Even the procession up the aisle to the altar in our Sunday liturgies, another feature of the reformed liturgy, can might help us capture the mystery of our faith. The way in which the Litany of the Saints, set to music, is used in ordination and baptismal ceremonies is another striking example of modern restoration of an ancient ritual.

Secondly, the church should cultivate further opportunities for cliffside experiences among its own members. Retreats and prayer weekends, too, can be occasions for such experiences. Even if their popularity has dropped off greatly in recent decades, the church could continue to integrate periods of more intense prayer into the preparation for the sacrament of Confirmation and perhaps even for Matrimony. Could the age of Confirmation be deferred until the late teens or early twenties when the young Christian is mature enough to confirm his own commitment to the faith? The church has made great progress in recent years in converting what might have once been a sacramental formalities into initiation rituals. There’s no reason to stop now.

Finally, if the church is to remain to its mission, it must be prepared to dialogue with others at the cliffside in language they can respond to. This means not just rolling out the dogmas, but creating space for doubt and uncertainty, for we are more like the unchurched seekers than we care to admit. This is not to deny the importance of doctrine–that rational compilation of what mystics, saints and thinkers have mined from their religious experiences over the centuries–but it is to acknowledge its limits.

In a word, the Catholic Church, like all religions during all periods of history, must regain its sense of the sacred. To do so it must cultivate the myths and rituals that have been foundational for any religion, for it is these much more than the rational dogma that bring followers to their own encounter with the divine. The symbols and rituals, along with the stories that support them, speak to us of the divine in parts of our being that doctrines will never reach.

Francis X. Hezel, SJ

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