

‘...Through a Glass Darkly: Reflections on the Sacred’

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Since ancient times, the religious imagination has, it seems, been fascinated by the metaphor of light, and has expressed this fascination in a range of images: sun, stars, lamp, candle, halo, fire and so on. The symbolic associations of light constitute a catalogue of existential and conceptual goods: beyond its role as symbol of divine presence itself, light is a symbol of life, or majesty and glory, of blessing and sanctification, of truth, of righteousness, of love, of nourishment, of prosperity, of renewal and of rebirth. So the sun gods of ancient civilisations cast their radiance over all of creation and, in particular, human creation: Apollo was god, not only of the sun, but also of music, poetry and science. In like fashion, the use of notions of the divine light - the light of the soul, enlightenment, illumination, emanation, reflection and so on – devolves from religion into other cultural spheres. The popularity of these light metaphors in turn makes them a good indicator of the relations between the cultural spheres. For example, the theme of divine illumination has historically served to link religious and philosophical thought (in Plato and in Descartes, for example), so that even in a philosophical context, the use of this metaphor has retained religious overtones.

The ubiquity and semantic breadth of light metaphors in the West may in large measure be traced to the biblical narrative, wherein it serves as a master image. The narrative itself is enveloped in the imagery of light: in the beginning, it is the first created thing (Gen 1:3-4) and at the end, the light of God obliterates all darkness and the night is no more (Rev 22:5). Both Old and New Testaments are steeped in the imagery of the ‘everlasting light’ (Isa 60:19). Given its ubiquity, one might expect to find an extension of this metaphor – the metaphor of

reflected light - should also figure prominently. But in fact, there are remarkably few scriptural references to the mirror.¹ Among these, the Pauline passage, adopted in the title of this volume, is perhaps the most compelling: 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known' (1 Cor 13:12).² The reason for the dearth of such metaphors may be explained by the passage itself, which distinguishes between the indirect vision of God that is available to us in the present, and the direct vision that awaits us. Paul here reinterprets the Platonic concept that this world is a poor reflection of the ideal. In Book VI of the *Republic*, Plato distinguished true Forms and images, truth and illusion, noting that the sun (the Form of the Good) cannot be seen directly by humans because it is blinding.³ So humankind may see the glory of God only as in a mirror – that is, indirectly and dimly. If the mirror gives us an inferior reflection of God, its value as metaphor is likewise diminished.

That said, the centrality of reflective metaphors to Plato's discussion of the human imaging of the Forms meant that it was almost inevitable that these metaphors should resurface in Neoplatonic thought. The question that the mirror is employed to address concerns the nature of the image of God reflected in creation. So the Great Chain of Being can be symbolically portrayed as a series of mirrors, the highest order of creation in the human mind being distinguished from the lowest by the

¹ The NT, for example, contains one other reference: James 1:23-25, which describes he who obeys God's message as keeping a mirror image in his soul of what he should be. In 2 Cor 3:18, Paul uses a related verb form to describe Christ's followers as those who mirror, rather than imitate, Christ's virtues.

² The Revised Version translates 'glass' (Gr *esoptron*) more precisely as 'mirror,' which also overcomes the anachronism, in that Roman mirrors were standardly made of metal.

³ Plato, *Republic*, translated by G M A Grube, Indianapolis, 1974, VI, 508b-e. Note the parallel between sensible and intelligible reflection: 'What the Good itself is in the world of thought in relation to the intelligence and things known, the sun is in the visible world in relation to sight and things seen,' *ibid*.

quality of the image that is reflected in it. In Augustine, too, the rational soul mirrors divinity:

The human soul is never anything save rational or intellectual, and hence, if it is made after the image of God in respect to this, that it is able to use reason and intellect in order to understand and behold God, then from the moment when that nature so marvellous and so great began to be, whether this image be so worn out as to be almost none at all, or whether it be obscured and defaced, or bright and beautiful, certainly it always is.⁴

Here is introduced into Christian thought the idea that was later to enjoy an illustrious career in modern secular thought, as we shall see: the mirror of reflection of the mind. In Augustine, the mirror metaphor is reinforced by another inherited from Neoplatonic thought: the illumination provided by the divine light. Like physical sight, understanding or intellectual sight is conditional on illumination, the source being the light that emanates from the divine mind and which, illuminating the human mind, endows it with understanding. Truth is identified with God and the mind's ability to reflect the truth is a function of man's creation in God's image. The epistemic optimism implicit in Augustine's use of this metaphor is perhaps one of his chief intellectual gifts to Western thought.

The Christian use of the mirror metaphor remains ambivalent, however, in that the material nature of the reflective surface of the mind conflicts with its spiritual nature. This tension is most evident in the thought of Bonaventure, for whom the mirror of God and the mirror of earthliness provide opposing images. In

⁴ Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, Volume XIV, Chapter 4, 186 in Philip Schaff, editor, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 3, Massachusetts, 1995. Note also: 'This trinity, [of memory, understanding and love or will] then, of the mind, is not therefore the image of God, because the mind remembers itself, and understands and loves itself; but because it can also remember, understand and love Him by whom it was made.' Ibid, Volume XIV, Chapter 12, 191.

his discussion of the differing ways that the principles of knowledge are provided to the knower, Bonaventure employs a description of the images of the mind that is to form the foundation for the use of the mirror metaphor in modern thought:

Since, then, certain knowledge belongs to the rational spirit, insofar as it is the image of God, it follows that in this knowledge the spirit attains to the eternal reasons. But since, as long as it is in the wayfaring state, [the rational spirit] is not fully deiform, it does not attain to them clearly and fully and distinctly.⁵

The adoption by René Descartes of the metaphor of images in the mind clearly and distinctly perceived marks his thought as an heir to the illuminationism of the Neoplatonists. This metaphor also allows us to trace a direct line of influence of Pauline thought on modern preoccupations. For it has been argued that modern thought in general is obsessed with concepts of mirroring – to its detriment. In his controversial - but nevertheless highly influential - *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, American philosopher Richard Rorty argued that modern thought has been highjacked by the demands of epistemic adequacy and that this can be attributed in large measure to its dependence on this single metaphor. The mirror metaphor, he claims, has underwritten a bifurcation between inner perception and outer reality, wherein the subject is impelled to believe the truth of a proposition by virtue of the fact that the state of affairs it represents is mirrored in the mind and discovered by introspection. Claiming that certain beliefs are immune to doubt because their reflections are ‘closest to the mind’, Descartes constructed a ‘permanent, neutral framework’ that would ‘constrain all inquiry’ and adjudicate knowledge claims from all areas of culture.⁶ Embracing this metaphor,

⁵ Bonaventure, *Disputed Questions Concerning Christ's Knowledge*, translated by E R Fairweather in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, New York, 1970, q 4.

⁶ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Oxford, 1980, 315.

Immanuel Kant schematises the function of transcendental reflection thus: 'Reflection (*reflexio*) does not concern itself with objects themselves with a view to deriving concepts from them directly, but is the state of mind in which we first set ourselves to discover the subjective conditions under which [alone] we are able to arrive at concepts.'⁷ Post-Cartesian thought has thereby proclaimed itself 'the tribunal of pure reason.'⁸

If Rorty is right in his claim that the post-Cartesian sovereignty of epistemology is explicable – in some measure – by reference to this metaphor, this may in turn help to explain the status of religion in modern thought. For it suggests a co-option of this metaphor to a purpose other than that of Descartes' pre-*Enlightenment* predecessors. The Neoplatonic thinkers employed it to suggest the continuity between the divine mind and the human, and the singularity of the truth – necessary, immutable and eternal – understood by both. The image serves a primarily metaphysical purpose of linking transcendent and immanent realms. And whereas Descartes himself may have rightfully expected that his metaphor of clear and distinct images might continue to attest to the truth of divine illumination, his followers were more circumspect. For the modern age, clarity and distinctness serve as epistemological criteria by which religious phenomena are judged strictly wanting. To see 'through a glass darkly' is to fail to have a clarity of vision sufficient for knowledge. The divine is cast adrift from the rational, empirical world – that which is most truly human - and religion must satisfy itself as having value on other counts - ethical, aesthetic, psychological or sociological. Cartesian Man retains many of the attributes which formerly marked him as made in the image of God – in particular, his potential for omniscient and omnipotent stewardship of this

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by N K Smith, New York, 1968, 267.

⁸ Rorty, *op cit*, 139.

earth. But these attributes are now self-endowed, a product of his own powers of reflection.⁹

Rorty's condemnation of the mirror imagery of modern thought is at one with an attempt to open it to a broader hermeneutic (albeit his concerns are in no way religious).¹⁰ It is by way of the contemporary critique of this Cartesian metaphor of mirroring that we may revisit the theme of religious reflection – and reflection on religions. Are there forms of reflection proper to religion that modern Western thought may have neglected or sidelined in the last few centuries? What can religion tell us of forms of human reflection that exceed the rational and/or empirical discourses of modernity? Such questions imply a further level of analysis: what forms of reflection are adequate to the study of religion itself? The study of religion arose as a science within the intellectual climate of late modernity; at its inception, it was of a piece with the anthropological ambitions of the human sciences more generally. But is the study of religions – especially non-Western religions – adequately served by the scientific methodologies that prevailed at its origins? What, in other words, does the discipline of religious studies offer to contemporary scholarship by way of methodological analysis? Can it shed light on forms of human reflection that are *sui generis* and that concern a vision of the sacred? In light of the demise of the Cartesian subject, these questions become once again particularly pertinent.

It is in the context of these questions that I introduce the essays of this collection. Broadly, the questions that these articles address may be divided into four categories: questions

⁹ The gender marking in this paragraph is intentional, in that the Cartesian subject, like the Augustine, is very clearly gendered male by these writers. On this, see for example Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy*, London, 1984, Chapters 2 and 3.

¹⁰ Rorty is at best vague about the alternative to the mirroring epistemology he disavows. He advocates a pragmatism which identifies truth with 'what it is better for us to believe' and 'no more or no less than the best idea we currently have about how to explain what is going on,' Rorty, *op cit*, 308, 385.

concerning the importance of reflection on religion to the broader artistic culture of the West; questions concerning the methodologies proper to reflection on the sacred; questions concerning the forms of reflection developed within non-Western religious traditions; and lastly, questions raised by contemporary movements in religion. The essays of the first section find in the music, literature, art and film of the last century a religious sensibility that is commonly understated by critics; this sensibility is variously alive to the symbolic inversions of religious iconoclasm, the internal coherence of sacred spaces and the 'fear and trembling' of the exiled immigrant. The essays of the second section build on such insight. They explain in detail how, by addressing the religious import of apparently secular philosophical and literary themes – themes such as the distinction between the normative and the natural, and between the real and the impossible, for example - we arm ourselves with a powerful critical tool for the evaluation of these themes. The essays of the third and fourth sections of this volume address specific issues concerning the academic reception of diverse religious traditions and new religious movements, showing how our understanding of religions is constructed by the definitions we take to them. In so doing, they highlight the specific conceptual demands – such as distinctions between differing forms of knowledge and of enlightenment – placed on the student of religion. The essays of the fourth section focus on a religious landscape in a state of transition across the globe, and investigate the ways in which our understanding of religious concepts – the pagan, the heathen, the cult and so on - need to develop so as to make sense of these changes.

My own contribution to this discussion will be slight. I would like to return to the theme of reflection – both religious reflection and reflection on the study of religion – by drawing attention to two of the most interesting uses of the mirror metaphor to have appeared of late: the metaphor of the mirror's tain and the metaphor of the curved (convex or concave) mirror. These

deserve mention in this context in that they show that the metaphors of reflection is richer and more volatile than suggested by the modern preoccupation with clarity and distinctness. This is of course a function of its status as linguistic trope: the life of a metaphor is dependent on its ability to suggest new ways of thinking about its object. Inversely, a metaphor dies, not only when it is no longer used, but also when it is overused, when its use becomes so standardly assumed that it attains the status of the literal. Nietzsche speaks of the concept as the 'residue of a metaphor.' Concepts are metaphors that have forgotten that this is what they are: they are 'the petrification and coagulation of a mass of images which originally streamed from the primal faculty of human imagination like a fiery liquid.'¹¹ The metaphor of the mirror risks petrification where it is assumed that the value of reflection lies purely and simply in its representational capacity. These two recent uses of this metaphor contest this assumption and breathe new life into what has perhaps become a rather tired metaphor.

The first of these metaphors appears in Rodolphe Gasché's *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*,¹² a highly influential reading of French philosopher Jacques Derrida's work that emphasises its continuity with received philosophical themes. The tain is employed by Gasché as a device to reflect upon philosophical use of reflective metaphors. The tain metaphor focuses attention on the reflective surface of the mirror, which at once distorts reality (reversing the image, for example) and yet provides a perspective, allowing visual fields which would otherwise be unavailable to us (the self-portrait, for example). Like others of Derrida's undecidables, the tain is at once the condition of

¹¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, 'On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense' in Daniel Breazeale, editor, *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s*, Atlantic Highlands, 1979, 86.

¹² Rodolphe Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1986, 6.

possibility of what appears as a faithful representation of the real and the condition of its impossibility as such – that is, as purely faithful representation. The tain is the fine film of difference between these two perspectives, which favours neither – and is necessary to each. But Derrida also invites us to look into the tain to discover what lies ‘behind’ it – ‘reflection’s unthought’, as Gasché calls it. This is reflection of alterity, the reflection of which is always other than itself, where ‘the origin of the speculation becomes a difference.’¹³ This focus on difference leads Gasché to claim that reflection and reflexivity ‘are precisely what will not fit in Derrida’s work.’¹⁴

The second of these metaphors appears in Luce Irigaray’s *The Speculum of the Other Woman*.¹⁵ Irigaray’s use of mirror imagery must be read against the background of the historic association of woman with the mirror: on the one hand (in the *Venus at her Toilette* paintings of Tintoretto and Titian, for example) the mirror symbolises pride, vanity and lust;¹⁶ and on the other (in the *speculum sine macula* held by the Virgin, for

¹³ In his earliest work, *Of Grammatology*, Derrida speaks of the proliferation of imagery that the reflective metaphor invites: of ‘pools of reflection’ in which ‘there is an infinite reference from other to the other, but no longer a source, a spring. There is no longer a simple origin. For what is reflected is split in itself and not only as an addition to itself of its image ... What can look at itself is not one; and the law of the addition of the origin to its representation, of the thing to its image, is that one plus one makes at least three.’ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore, 1976, 36.

¹⁴ Gasché, *op cit*, 6.

¹⁵ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, translated by Gillian C Gill, Ithaca, 1985.

¹⁶ This is an association exploited across the history of Western painting, in particular, in the *Venus at her Toilette* paintings of Tintoretto and Titian. It is also an association which reflects back ironically on the tradition itself, as John Berger points out, in that the mirror is used to deflect attention from the gaze of the painter/spectator himself on the naked female form. See John Berger *et al*, *Ways of Seeing*, Harmondsworth, 1972.

example) the mirror symbolises 'spotless' purity.¹⁷ Traditional metaphors of woman figure her in contradictory ways: here, the mirror indicates woman's special status as metaphor for humanity's division between materiality and spirituality. Irigaray builds on Simone de Beauvoir's claim that such images are projected by man as an inverted image of his own ideal self-reflection. Against that mode of reflection, metaphorically associated with the flat mirror, the convex mirror allows a wider field of vision. It allows, in fact, a wider visual field than is available to the eye.¹⁸ The object is framed by its world, presented *in situ*. In modernity's own representational terms, then, it can claim to provide the more authentic image. Irigaray focuses by contrast on the concave mirror, pointing out that, while the flat mirror claims to reflect all, it fails to reflect (on) itself. The concave mirror renders both its object and itself visible at once; reflection and self-reflection are seen to reflect each other. Irigaray presents the speculum as figuratively deflecting traditional images of woman, allowing woman to create their own divergent reflections of self. In such reflection, Irigaray argues, body and ideality, materiality and spirituality, immanence and transcendence, may come to see themselves in the other.

These recent uses of the mirror metaphor sit somewhat more comfortably with its popular connotations. For, beyond the mirror of reflection imagery which Rorty decries, lies a metaphoric tradition that is richer than he allows. The mirror is not merely a means to capture representations, faithfully or otherwise, but a vehicle for divination and prophesy and for creative imagination in general. In this capacity, it allows a

¹⁷ Interesting, this attributes links her to Wisdom: 'For she [Wisdom] is the brightness of the everlasting light, the unspotted mirror of the power of God, and the image of His goodness' (Wis 7:26). Mediaeval woman mystics, a discussion of whom lies at the centre of *Speculum*, employed the mirror metaphor as a symbol of their virginity.

¹⁸ The ability of the curved mirror to augment the visual field gives it a special status in the history of painting; the most well-known example is perhaps Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding* of 1434.

vision or perspective beyond that given by natural light – as Harry Potter discovers to his delight in the Mirror of Erised. The ambivalent power of this metaphor is expressed in the folklorish suspicion of mirrors for their ability to capture or reflect the soul – which of course makes them a handy accessory when vanquishing medusas and vampires. Looking to the ambivalent uses of this metaphor within our own tradition – and further, reflecting on the use of mirror imagery in other traditions – reveals the semantic reserves of this metaphor.

There is one last aspect of the imagery of light that deserves mention here, since it traverses and obscures the image of divine light introduced at the beginning of my discussion: this is the metaphor of divine darkness. In certain ‘mystical’ traditions of Western religious thought, we discover that darkness is not merely an absence of light, but something in a sense proper to the sacred in its own right. In the excess of light that is God is found the *coincidentia oppositorum*: the luminous darkness, the darkness of excessive light.¹⁹ In *The Darkness of God*, Denys Turner shows the extent to which Neoplatonic writers employed metaphors of darkness to speak of a divine before whom language is stretched to the limit. These metaphors were features of a subversive language designed to undermine our complacency in respect of our images of divinity, to guard against the temptation to suppose ‘that our language about God has succeeded in capturing the divine reality in some ultimately adequate way.’²⁰ Attending to them also allows a more nuanced account of the play of light and dark in our metaphorical tradition.

This returns us to Paul’s words in the title of this volume. Across his writings, Paul constructs a dualism of light and darkness, which provides him with a clear means of distinguishing the ‘children of light’ from the children ‘of the

¹⁹ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge, 1995, 18.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

night of darkness' (1 Thess 5:5).²¹ But a number of biblical passages deploy the imagery of darkness to a more inclusive end. As its creator, God is said to shroud himself in darkness to protect mortals and to cover himself from human view (Isa 45:7; Ex 33:20).²² If, as Paul claims, what we see 'through the glass dimly' is not God but a reflection (Gr, *ainigma*: riddle or intimation), then what is seen is necessarily subject to interpretation – and reinterpretation. The enigma of the sacred perplexes and intrigues for just this reason. The sacred is governed, not by specific metaphors rigidly applied, but by a splendidly rich semantic field whose wealth is structurally inexhaustible. Reflection on the sacred is thus necessarily open-ended: here, thought opens out onto alterity, beyond the division of source and image, ideal and copy, One and Other.

²¹ Note also in this connection Paul's question: 'For what fellowship has righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion has light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial?' (2 Cor 6, 14-15). Strictly, what Paul sets up is the logical distinction of dichotomy, in that the two terms are opposed, there is no association between them, and one term (light) has sovereignty over the other (darkness). The confrontation of light and darkness is a theme elsewhere in the NT (eg Luke 1:79). Like other dichotomies, the metaphor takes on a reality of its own, becoming no longer a rhetorical device but a metaphysical (and spiritual) reality.

²² The Hebrew Bible presents God a transcendent being, in whose appearance darkness is prominently featured (2 Sam 22:10, 12; Ps 18:9, 11 97:2). God is even said to 'dwell in thick darkness' (1 Kings 8:12; 2 Chron 6:1).