

The Divine

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But we are still left with the question – being a rational human being – who or what is this Higher Reality? In answering this question the only medium we have to express our thoughts are words, language. How unreliable and limited this mode of expression is, modern philosophers have amply demonstrated in the last number of decades. Language shapes and limits our view of reality. The mystics of all ages and cultures have also pointed out this limitation, especially when trying to convey transpersonal experiences.

The Tao that can be told
is not the eternal Tao.

The name that can be named
is not the eternal Name.

We are trying to describe the indescribable. Words cannot begin to encompass the Divine. “All we can say accurately about God, according to Thomas Aquinas, is that God is, not *what* God is...This radical humility...before the ineffable mystery of God is the linchpin of Christian theology.” (p.131) When we try to define God, there is the danger of words becoming idols; perhaps that is the reason Jesus did not write anything down himself. He used stories to point to the meaning and extent of the true Reality, the Kingdom of God. But His emphasis on prayer would lead to spiritual experience affording true knowledge, communicated at a deeper level.

“The divine Ground of all existence is a spiritual Absolute, ineffable in terms of discursive thought, but (in certain circumstances) susceptible of being directly experienced and realized by the human being”. (*Aldous Huxley*) Huxley draws this conclusion based on ideas expressed in all the wisdom traditions.

Clement of Alexandria (2nd Century) was the first Christian Church Father to express this thought in Christianity. He and Origen and the monks who followed their teaching, such as Evagrius and Cassian, were in the apophatic (negative) mystical tradition who felt God was beyond our understanding: “God is beyond the One. He is ineffable, beyond all speech, beyond every concept, beyond every thought...God is not in space, but above both place and time and name and thought. God is without limits, without form, without name.” (*Clement*)

Although the Divine cannot be grasped by our ordinary intelligence, our stages of a growing perception of the Divine can be described. Origen’s map of Christian growth, which has remained a classic in the Christian East and was completely accepted by Evagrius points to three levels of development on the spiritual path, which will make the experience of the Kingdom of God, the Divine Presence, a possibility. The first one is ‘practice’, which encompasses silent prayer and at other times a constant watching of our thoughts and not only our thoughts. Evagrius mentions a clear sequence: first becoming

aware of sensations, then feelings, which become expressed in thought and which lead to a desire and its consequent action. This process is nowadays often called 'mindfulness'. Evagrius is therefore the first Christian teacher of mindfulness!

Doing this with full attention leads to awareness of ego-centrally motivated behaviour, which in turn leads to more virtuous conduct. This process was called 'purifying the emotions' by the Desert Fathers and Mothers. Only when our conditioned ego-driven behaviour is understood and put aside, do its emotions, prejudices and false images no longer cloud our vision of true Reality.

The next two levels are about 'theoria', the vision of God. The first level of this vision is reached through the contemplation of nature. It is seeing the Divine in everything: "lift the stone and you will find me, cut the wood in two and I'll be there" (*Gospel of Thomas*). Everything is in the Divine and the Divine is in everything. But the Divine is not limited by creation but reaches over and beyond that.

We hear this expressed by St Anthony, the first of the Desert fathers: "One of the wise men of that time went to find the holy man Anthony and asked him: 'Father, how can you be happy when you are deprived of the consolation books can give?' Anthony replied: 'My philosopher friend, my book is the nature of creatures; and this book is always in front of me, when I want to read the word of God.'" Evagrius agrees: "As for those who are far from God...God made it possible for them to come near to the knowledge of him and his love for them through the medium of creatures."

This is the level everyone can reach. Our attitude then becomes contemplative; we are aware of the Divine essence in everyone and everything, yet we are still in the world and very much a part of it. It is the level of the 'contemplative in action', who acts from his/her spiritual centre out of compassion.

The second level of 'theoria' is unitive consciousness, the total experience of Oneness with everything in the Divine, which is the Kingdom of God.