

Over my Head, I Hear Music in the Air

David Paterson reflects on ‘embodiment’ in various religions and as the crucial Christian myth.

I was asked to write something about embodiment, so I’ve been living with the idea for over a month, with all sorts of ideas going through my head about what ‘embodiment’ might mean. The concept of ‘incarnation’ in traditional Christian theology was my first thought, so I went back to the articles in *The Myth of God Incarnate*, which caused such a splash in 1977. But, although much of today’s Christian theology seems not to go even that far, I didn’t want to start there, but in what it might mean to experience something which is **not** ‘embodied’. As Jaynes puts it:

‘O, what a world of unseen visions and heard silences, this insubstantial country of the mind! This consciousness that is myself of selves, that is everything, and yet nothing at all – what is it?’¹

Humanity has evolved in a material world which we experience with our physical senses, yet we human animals have acquired this mysterious ability we call consciousness, and find ourselves in a world of imagination, of fear and agony, wonder and poetry. We experience something more than our senses can account for, and we tell stories in our attempt to understand; and the struggle which has driven physical evolution to this experience of consciousness gives way to a new evolution of the imagination. The process is revealed in literature, poetry, music and art, but also in philosophy, science and mathematics. Abstract thought seems to be a disembodiment.

There is a remarkable passage in Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time*, in which he recounts a train of thought he and Roger Penrose developed in seeking mathematical equations to fully describe the universe. If the time element t in the equations is replaced by $t\sqrt{-1}$ – known in mathematics as ‘imaginary time’ – Hawking writes:

‘there would be no singularities where the laws of science broke down and no boundaries to space-time at which one would have to appeal

to God... The universe would neither be created nor destroyed. It would just BE.’

And later in the same chapter:

‘a scientific theory is just a mathematical model we make to describe our observations: it exists only in our minds. So it is meaningless to ask: Which is real, ‘real’ or ‘imaginary’ time? it is simply a matter of which is the more useful description.’²

This ‘other world’ of our consciousness, is in fact the same world that we experience in our concepts of space, time, and mathematics, but our imaginations can somehow step outside it, see into its depths, and re-create it. We don’t need a god to explain how the universe came to be, but we need to imagine one to express our wonder. The human spirit and the gods evolve together. In the *Negro Spiritual*:

‘Over my head, I hear music in the air – there must be a God somewhere’³

In our experience of **all-that-is** as a physical, visible world, things and people exist separately from one another; but there is a deeper, more mysterious and wonderful understanding that evokes a unity in all things. Some Eastern philosophies see the experience of the physical as *maya* (roughly translated as ‘illusion’) and the deeper understanding as the Real; recently it has become fashionable to derive the two from the activities of our left and right hemispheres. We can choose which is the more useful description for any task. We don’t really step outside our universe to make sense of it; there is no outside.

But we do need our gods and they must evolve with us. They are what we feel about ourselves; they express wonder, the need for meaning, and an existential longing. They evolve with the stories that humans have told for many thousands of years. Like this one from the Mayan tradition:

In the world of the first gods, the ones who made the world, everything is a dream. The earth in which we live and die is a great mirror of the world in which the gods live. The great gods all live together. They are all equal. There is not one that is higher and one that is lower.⁷⁴

The stories of the gods coming down to earth bridge the gap between the physical and the spiritual – the world of sense and the world of imagination, the scientific and the poetic, technology and the arts. We live our lives with our feet on the ground and our heads above the clouds. The world's religions, in a vast variety of ways, give us access to where our interactions with the world of our senses meets the other world of our thoughts, our dreams, our consciousness.

In the Sanatana Dharma ('Hindu') tradition, the real is Brahman (the world soul), and the inner reality of the individual is the Atman (the personal soul). For Advaita Vedanta (nondualist interpretation of the Vedas) the Brahman and the Atman are one. All separation of the physical and the spiritual is *maya*. But the Bhakti poetical tradition protests that only separate individuals can offer one another love and devotion. To surrender yourself to the love of a god is far more life-fulfilling than the cold, impersonal philosophy of *advaita*. The one divine and undivided reality must be incarnated, and so in the Shaivite and Vaishnavite traditions the divine is embodied in avatars, each with a representation – a *murti*. Love and devotion bind all things together. We 'need some-body to love'.

Other eastern religions have other ways of conceiving the unity of **all-that-is** and bringing that unity into our daily lives. The Buddhist tradition has no god, but expresses its ideals in the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, and embodies them in the *samgha*, the body of all the Buddha's community.

For the Jain, the innermost depths of devotion are commemorated in the great meditators of the



Mayan Old Antonio

past; their statues – hundreds, thousands of near-identical cross-legged figures – embody their devotion.

In Islam, the unity of **all-that-is** is expressed in a powerful insistence on the oneness of Allah. There can be no figures or pictures of Allah, who is unique and cannot be compared to anything. Embodiment is in the revelation which the Prophet Muhammad brings. The *Qur'an* 'embodies' Allah's message and carries the 99 names describing Allah's nature. The Umma (the body of all believers) mirrors the oneness of Allah.

In the Sikh faith, Waheguru, the Great Teacher, is embodied in the Adi Granth (Guru Granth Sahib), a remarkable collection of songs from Hindu, Muslim and Sikh sources, and in the Khalsa, the fellowship of the purified. The divine is brought to earth, and dress symbols (the five K's) are a constant reminder.

In the Jewish tradition, inherited by Christianity, the earliest stories of God are firmly rooted in this world. Yahweh walks in the Garden of Eden in the evening (Genesis 2), speaks to Noah, visits Abraham in the form of three visitors. He speaks to Moses from a burning bush, then a mountain top; as 'Lord of Hosts' he gives his chosen people victories over their enemies. But he becomes increasingly disembodied and remote, and later texts are about loyalty to Yahweh, and confidence in His faithfulness even in the absence of any evidence. As the psalm says: 'Why should the nations say, "Where is now their God?" As for our God, he is in heaven. He does whatever he pleases' (Psalm 115: 2-3, *Common Worship*).

The tribal god takes on a life of his own as a disembodied spirit. But he is embodied in the Law, and the prophets insist that this God – now in heaven – commands us to serve him by living a life of righteousness, of justice and peace, of loving kindness. God is embodied in the Law.

In the world of our imagination, where we find the unseen and where new worlds evolve, we are free to go where we like; but this 'Way' must be embodied in the day-by-day world. Old Antonio in 'The Way'⁵ (*Zapatista Stories*) says, after getting lost in the jungle: 'You thought I found the way back. I didn't find it. It wasn't there. We had to make it.' And the way has to be made by walking.

The Christian Myth

Now you might say that in purifying the notion of God, Jewish monotheism has made it (him) remote and out of touch with the world; a new embodiment is needed, a new incarnation.

In the New Testament, Paul's writings are the earliest we have, and they proclaim 'Jesus Christ our Lord, descendant of David, who, in the spirit of holiness that was in him, was proclaimed Son of God through his resurrection from the dead' (Romans 1: 1-4). He was 'appointed by God to sacrifice his life so as to win reconciliation through faith' (Rom 3: 25). 'What proves that God loves us is that Christ died for us while we were still sinners' (Rom 5: 8). He 'enables us to be his sons by adoption' (Galatians 4: 4-5). Through him 'the love of God is poured into our hearts by the Spirit which has been given to us' (Rom 5: 5).

In the Gospels, written later, Jesus is referred to (or calls himself) 'Son of Man' (which could mean a model for humanity, and carries Old Testament echoes of Ezekiel and Daniel) and 'Son of God' (which could mean a godly man – someone who shows us God – and carries Old Testament echoes of kingship and the Messiah). His godly living was revolutionary, showing the strength of unconditional compassion, and it was a new evolution of god's nature.

In Mark, the man Jesus becomes the Son of God at his baptism (Mark 1: 11); and so also in John, for the Prologue about the eternal Word coming into the world leads straight into John the Baptist's witness: 'I saw the Spirit coming down upon him from heaven like a dove...he is the chosen one of God' (John 1: 32-34).

Only Matthew and Luke find it necessary to emphasise Jesus of Nazareth's eligibility for Messiahship by having him born in 'David's city' Bethlehem. Matthew's nativity story emphasises

the promised fulfilment of kingship, and Luke's the promised fulfilment of priesthood, and they each derive his descent from David through Joseph. There are no references to either story anywhere else in the New Testament, and they do not seem to be part of the original message. It is not in birth stories that the Incarnation lies, let alone in virgin birth; perhaps it is seen in Jesus' baptism, but more certainly in his compassionate ministry, and specifically his death and resurrection. 'God spoke to our ancestors by the prophets; but in our own time, the last days, he has spoken to us through his Son... He is the radiant light of God's glory and the perfect copy of his nature' (Hebrews 2: 1-3). And (later in the same Epistle): 'He learnt to obey through suffering' and 'he became for all who obey him the source of eternal salvation' (Heb 5: 8, 9)

And in the Letter to the Colossians, there is what seems to be an early hymn:

He is the image of the unseen God,
the first-born of all creation ...
and he holds all things in unity.
Now the Church is his body,
he is its head...
God wanted all perfection
to be found in him ...
when he made peace
by his death on the cross.

(Colossians 1: 15-20)

The Gospels, in giving Jesus the titles Son of Man and Son of God, show him fulfilling human nature and godly nature, holding heaven and earth together. There is no need for tortuous Chalcedonian arguments about two persons and one substance. There's no paradox unless you believe with Plato or with some forms of monotheism that the divine and the earthly are irrevocably different. We all have the two natures, the animal and the spirit. Gerard Manley Hopkins saw the pure wonder of our spiritual nature in the mess of the physical:

...Flesh fade, and mortal trash
Fall to the residuary worm;
world's wildfire, leave but ash:
In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is,
since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd,
patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond.⁶

Christ dies in agony on what in Genesis chapter 1 is the sixth day of creation, when humanity is made in God's image; and he rises on the first day of a new creation, in which his body will be the Church. We are the embodiment of the risen Christ, and must have the mind of Christ and be filled with the Spirit of Christ.

The Church is a 'body' in another sense too, a community of interacting elements which form an organism and enable it to function: 'Just as our bodies have many parts, so all of us, in union with Christ, form one body, and as parts of it we belong to each other' (Rom 12: 4, 5). – 'each part must be equally concerned for all the others' (1 Corinthians 12: 25).

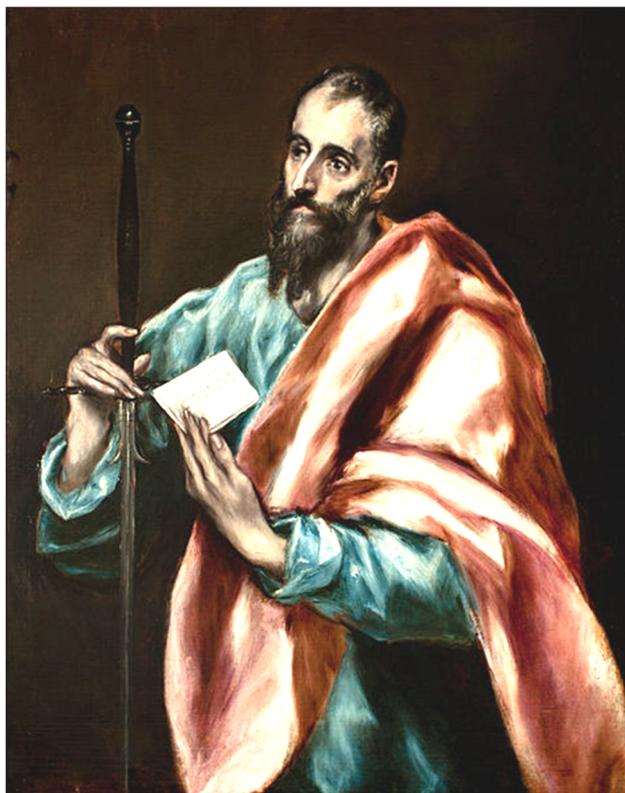
From early in the life of Jesus' followers, the Lord's Supper was a source of nourishment for his Body the Church:

'For this is what I received from the Lord; that on the night that he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took some bread, thanked God for it, broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this as a memorial of me". In the same way he took the cup after supper, and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me."' (1 Cor 11: 23-25)

The Eucharist first commemorates the crucifixion; this is the starting point for Christ's body – it must suffer for the world. Then the Eucharist embodies the risen Christ and his outpouring Spirit in food and drink for his Body, whose task is to embody the Kingdom. All are physical things, all are spiritual things, all are embodied in the world, re-uniting the physical and the spiritual. As we had no need for the Chalcedonian definition, so we have no need for transubstantiation.

There's a lot of good things in the earth all around all around in this little round earth.
And man nails man to a cross of wood
and bread is his body and wine is his blood
and we drink of the love and the wrath of God
in the good things all around.
So open your window and look all around.
You can see that your brother has his fair share
of the good things all around.⁷

These are the things that God has revealed to us 'through the Spirit, for the Spirit reaches the depths of everything, even the depths of God' (1 Cor 2: 11); and for 'those who have the mind of



St Paul by El Greco (1610-14). El Greco Museum, Toledo.
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Christ' (1 Cor 2: 16) they are a new stage in the evolution of God and the embodiment of God's Kingdom, transforming the nature of humanity from competition for survival, to embodiment of a new ideal of love and kindness.

The Church must be faithful to its mission, humble and sensitive in its task, honest about its failures, sharing its own and others' insights, making no exclusivist claims. Christianity is no more unique than any other religion, but it has a lot to offer for the future of humanity.

NOTES

1. Opening of Julian Jaynes' *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*?
2. Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*, chapter 8 'The Origin and Fate of the Universe.'
3. Negro spiritual (from *Tryin' To Make Heaven My Home*) Uzee Brown, Jr., composer.
4. 'The Story of Dreams', *Old Antonio* 4, in *Zapatista Stories* (trans: Dinah Livingstone).
5. 'The Way', *Old Antonio* 7, *Zapatista Stories*.
6. G.M. Hopkins. 'That nature is a Heraclitean fire'.
7. Hymn from the Twentieth Century Church Light Music Group.

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