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# SEEING THROUGH: THE MIRROR AS RELIGIOUS SYMBOL

## I

With mirrors we can see what is behind us, what is around the corner, what is far away, and most interesting, what we could not see at all otherwise, namely, ourselves. Whether mirrors have been pools of water, polished metal discs, or silvered glass, they seem to have always been an important part of human life. Mirrors help us gain knowledge, they create fear in those unacquainted with them, they can be tools of intrigue, they can be playthings, they can be objects of great beauty.

Since religious symbols are drawn from daily life it is not surprising to discover that the mirror is a pervasive and central religious symbol. This is not the place to set forth a general theory of religion, though my treatment of the mirror symbol presupposes one. Perhaps it is enough to say that I think the religious life is essentially one of being transformed into a right relationship with what is ultimate and that symbols are both witnesses to and instruments of that transformation. I think the mirror is a good symbol for showing this central religious dynamic at work. *Religious revelation occurs on those extraordinary occasions when the invisible is rendered visible.* Consider that the mirror brings into view what would not be seen were the mirror not there. Note also the dialectical relationship between the mirror and its object; the image "on" the mirror is always of something that is not on the mirror. A vase across the room may be reflected in a mirror; but when I set the vase on the mirror I change everything: the mirror has become a tray.

With my title, "Seeing Through", I mean to suggest that the mirror symbol is an aid in the religious process of life-transforming "seeing-through". Let me give you four examples of this. In Bud-

dhism we will see how the mirror is symbolically broken in order to permit seeing through. Hinduism uses the mirror to develop a reflective elaboration of a transcending experience of non-duality. Islam shows how the mirror symbol is a fruitful means of articulating a fundamental dogma. Finally, I will ask you to consider the icons of the Eastern Church as mirrors.

## II

In 661 A.D. Hung-jen, the aging Fifth Patriarch of Buddhism in China, called his 500 monks together to announce the manner of selecting his successor.<sup>1</sup> The one whose short poem showed the best understanding of his self or original nature would receive the Patriarch's robe and begging bowl, symbols of the office. So sure were the other monks that their instructor, Shen Hsiu, would win that they did not even try to write a poem. Shen Hsiu himself entered the competition anonymously by putting an unsigned quatrain on the wall in the corridor leading to the Patriarch's room. He would reveal himself as author only if the Master were pleased. Here is his poem :

The body is the Tree of Perfect Wisdom;  
 The Mind is a clear framed mirror.  
 Always take care to wipe it  
 So that it will be free from dust.

The Master praised this verse and said that those who followed its teaching would benefit. Let us explore its meaning.

The Tree of Perfect Wisdom refers to the Bo tree under which the Buddha Gautama sat when he received Illumination and for 49 days and nights afterward. The body, then, is affirmed as the place, the physical setting or circumstance for illumination. This idea creeps into the second line where we are told that the mirror is *framed*. So, as a first result, we have body as setting for mind.

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1. Among the many available accounts of the "Platform Scripture of the Sixth Patriarch" is the one in *World of the Buddha*, edited by Lucien Stryk (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1969), pp. 334-42. My version of the poems is drawn from several translations.

Mind, too, is likened to an object, but to a mirror, something very different from a tree. The tree is a complex living system which draws from and gives to the beings around it. It takes its place in the world and invites being known as one entity among others. When we learn about bark or the foliage of a tree we increase our knowledge of the tree. The mirror can be contrasted with the tree on all these points. When we study the materials or back or dimensions of a mirror, we are not yet getting at what a mirror is. All of these are supporting conditions of a mirror but a mirror is an unusual object whose characteristic it is to have no formal character of its own. It reflects back whatever is in front of it without changing what is reflected or without being changed itself. *Because it is no-thing, it can be many things.* Shen Hsiu wanted to contrast body and mind, and with the analogy of tree and mirror, he seems to have found an effective way of doing so.

The second couplet takes us further into Buddhist teaching : Always take care to wipe it (the mirror)/So that it will be free from dust. Dust stands for all those things that obscure a mirror and prevent it from reflecting, for those things that turn it into just another physical object with a definite form. The gentle Shen Hsiu speaks of dust; we could add mud, mist, blood, sap, oil, etc. And dust is to mirror as greed, envy, worry, anger and boredom are to mind. We are urged to practise the disciplines of meditation and obedience so that our minds/mirrors will be able to be what they are.

The Master's praise led Shen Hsiu to reveal himself as the author. But when he presented himself full of anxious hope he was told that though he was at the doorway of full understanding he had not entered the house. He was asked to go away for a few days and see if he could produce another poem which would show that he had seen his self-nature. He went away and never did write that second verse.

A few months before, an illiterate young man from the South, Hui-Neng, had presented himself for instruction and after a stormy interview with the Master was sent to the kitchen to grind rice. He was told of Shen Hsiu's poem and asked to see it and have it read to him. He immediately asked that his own poem be written on the wall. Here it is :

There never was a Tree of Perfect Wisdom  
 Nor a clear framed mirror.  
 Since, finally, all is void,  
 Where could any dust land ?

All were astonished and full of admiration. In a midnight interview the Master confirmed to Hui-Neng that he had understood his self-nature. He gave him the robe and bowl but counselled a quick escape back home, knowing that the envy of others might put his life in danger.

What has happened to our mirror symbol and what marks the progress in spiritual understanding ? The first poem said that our nature is pure but can be sullied; Hui-Neng answers that the mind/mirror remains itself no matter what fills it. Shen Hsiu thought that diligent work on the mind was the way to protect it and know it; Hui-Neng saw further and realized that extreme concentration on the mind was the very way never to understand it. In fact, concentration on mind leads one to regard it as an entity, a thing like other things. We miss the difference taught by the analogy between tree and mirror. In the first poem, the mirror symbol is initially helpful but then becomes a block to insight. The second poem uses the first, requires it as a starting point, but then pushes language to the breaking point in order to keep the symbol open and point the way to the mystery beyond all symbolization.

### III

My Hindu mirror is from the writings of Śaṅkara, the founder of the Advaita or non-dualist school of philosophy. In the early eighth century A.D., he wrote that the "individual soul is to be considered a mere appearance of the highest Self, like the reflection of the sun in the water; it is neither directly that (i.e., the highest Self), nor a different thing."<sup>2</sup> Whereas the Buddhist poem prods into awareness, Śaṅkara's analogy is based upon something already given. Professor Eliot Deutsch says "the Advaitin . . . begins with the central experience of non-duality and looks for ways by which this can be communicated and for what follows from it; he does not arrive at the fact of non-duality as the con-

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2. Śaṅkara, *The Vedānta Sūtras with the Commentary by Śaṅkarācārya*, two parts, trans. George Thibaut (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1890 and 1896), II:68.

clusion of an inductive or deductive demonstration."<sup>3</sup> The Buddhist repels speculative thought because it may mislead; the Hindu uses reflection to better understand the basic spiritual experience of unity.

This experience has been described in a variety of ways. After disciplined meditation the devotee apprehends the transcendent absolute which is *beyond description* (the unseen seeing one, the unknown knowing one, not this, not that), *omnipresent* (there is nothing else that sees; there is nothing else that knows; Brahman is fisherman, fish, hook, and sea), and *all-inclusive* (the formula repeatedly given to the inquiring youth is, "That Thou Art").

But the mystical ecstasy passes and with one's ordinary eyes one sees that even if Brahman is ultimate, other beings such as individual souls seem to exist. Although ecstatic experience seems to be in conflict with ordinary experience, Śaṅkara holds that they are not. He uses the metaphor of the sun and its reflection to explain the relation between individual soul (*jīva*) and the highest Self (*Ātman*). Let us see what the metaphor can teach us.

Śaṅkara chooses the reflection metaphor because it shows how the individual is unlike but not totally unlike *Ātman*. The first thing to note is that the original object is primary. The sun is the sun whether or not it is reflected. Only where there is a reflective surface *can* the sun be reflected. The quality of the reflection depends on the surface, not on the sun. If the surface is rough, the reflection will tremble and waver; it will be, as we say, a poor reflection. If the surface is smooth, the reflection will be clear; it will resemble the sun as well as a reflection can. We see then, that the reflection is doubly dependent: on the original and on the surface. But although it is derivative it can resemble the sun. Those features of the sun which can be reflected are more or less accurately reflected. On the water we see the sun reflected.

Yet, the reflected image of the sun does not appear where the sun should have or even could have appeared. The reflection is like the sun in some respects; yet it is not the sun. It is not a reality capable

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3. Eliot Deutsch, *Advaita Vedānta: A philosophical Reconstruction* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press 1969), p. 54, n. 15.

of action as is the sun. It is bound to the reflecting surface, which is *not* like the sun. It would be a mistake to define the sun according to its reflectable qualities, that is shape and colour, and then conclude that the reflection is identical with the sun.

So, the reflection is like and unlike the original. Let us now consider how the reflection can help and hinder our knowing the original. And let us contrast reflection with illusion. Sometimes what seems to be a snake turns out to be a rope, what seems to be gleaming silver turns out to be a piece of shell. Is the reflection perhaps just an illusory appearance of the sun? Śaṅkara and his followers say No. They point out that when the illusion is exposed we no longer see the object as a snake or as silver. Rather, those same sensations are now ingredient to our knowledge of rope and shell. The initial judgment is exploded and another takes its place. Although ropes and snakes do share certain qualities, we are prepared to say that this object now before us is a rope and not at all a snake. It is not the same case with the reflection and the sun. The reflection has some of the qualities of the sun and this likeness persists even when we recognize that the reflection is only a reflection and not the sun itself. When an illusion is known for what it is, it is destroyed; when a reflection is known for what it is, it endures. We conclude, then, that even though it is limited the reflection *may* help in knowing the original.

In what circumstances could the reflection be a hindrance? If, instead of seeing the sun reflected, we saw only the reflection of the sun, we may be misled. For if we saw only the reflection we would tend to miss the distinction between the image and the reflecting surface and also to forget the original. We would fall into illusion if we took the reflection to be independent and real.

How can all of this be related to the spiritual task of seeing through the individual soul to the Ultimate? The image can help us see that Brahman is ultimate and that the individual soul exists only because of Brahman. It can help us understand how, even though we are not Brahman, we can still be like Brahman. And when we consider the possibility of shifting our glance from the image to the original, we can understand the Hindu quest for identification with Brahman. If we turn aside from the image and its material adjunct, we can see the sun itself. Similarly, if we focus on that element of us

which is eternal, if we ignore what is world-bound, we will discover that we are spirit and as such we are indeed Brahman; we will recognize the truth of the statement "That Thou Art!" (*Tat Tvam Asi!*).

To sum up, we can say that using the metaphor of mirroring, Śaṅkara and his school have found a way to articulate their experience of unity and, more than that, a way to show others how to see through their individuality to their unity with the Ultimate.

#### IV

In his book, *Understanding Islam*, Frithjof Schuon says that in Islam the line of demarcation between the relative and the absolute separates the world from God.<sup>4</sup> In another place he says that the mirror as symbol is seen as receptive if we are looking downwards, and luminous if we are looking upwards.<sup>5</sup> Let us take these two distinctions as guides for interpreting the mirror symbol in Islam.

If the world is relative to Allah the Absolute, then the look downwards is from Allah to the world and the world as mirror is receptive. What does a mirror receive? It receives light from a source of light. The mirror in complete darkness is not a mirror strictly speaking. In order to be a mirror, it must be illumined. Similarly, apart from having received being from God, the creature is nothing. Its reality is entirely dependent upon the Absolute. The *Koran* says: "Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth" (XXIV, 35), that is, all that you perceive comes from Him.

We see that both the mirror and the creature are receptive, but the modes of receptivity must be distinguished. Within the world one thing is a source, another a receptor and the common medium is light. With light as the standard, we could generate a scale of luminosity and this is what we do, roughly in ordinary discernments between bright and dark, more precisely with photographic light meters, and to a still higher degree of precision in the laboratory. For the relation between

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4. Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, trans. D. M. Matheson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1963), p. 24.

5. Frithjof Schuon, *In the Tracks of Buddhism*, trans. Marco Pallis (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1968), p. 100.

the absolute God and the relative creature, light is not a common medium in so simple a way. If God is taken to be light, he does not give light pure and simple. Light coming from God is formed. The world is "formed light" such that it is possible to look at the forms and never consider their source in Absolute light. An Islamic thinker would say that the world is a manifestation of God, that is, receptive, but not God himself.

What, now, if we look upwards, if we regard the divine as the mirror, this time as luminous? What is luminous is capable of giving rise to sight. What does the creature see when looking toward God? Ibn Arabi, who lived from 1165 to 1240, says that the creature will always see its own form, not God as such.<sup>6</sup> There is a parallel to the ordinary mirror. When we look into a mirror, we see the forms rather than the mirror although we know that we see the forms only because of the mirror. Try as we might, we cannot see the mirror and the form at the same time. Some would say that our inability, when we look towards God, to see anything other than our own form proves that religion is a projection of our qualities onto God. Ibn Arabi, on the other hand sees this feature as altogether appropriate for the relation between Absolute and relative and says that there is no symbol "more direct and more conformed to contemplation and revelation."<sup>7</sup> The gaze is upwards, Godwards, and that is the crucial posture for faithful obedience, yet the difference between relative and Absolute is maintained. We see God in the way appropriate for the specific creature we are.

And when we see *ourselves* not simply as form but as light we can try to become as clear as possible. We can begin an interior search for our metaphysical roots. And Muslims say that we can come to reflect light better and better. Ibn Arabi says of such a person, 'In you God can contemplate His Names, more specifically, the Name He has given himself in you'. You can become, in turn, a mirror because others can see God in you. Rumi, the great thirteenth century Persian mystical poet, said "Those who are beautiful are the mirror of divine beauty;

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6. Muhyi-d-din Ibn Arabi, *La Sagesse des Prophetes*, trans. Titus Burckhardt (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1974), p. 46. English translations of this text are mine.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 47.



the love that they inspire is a reflection of a desire whose object is God.'<sup>8</sup> Some Islamic mystics do not even attempt to teach transcendent verities; they say that their entire spiritual vocation is to polish the mirror of the heart.<sup>9</sup>

## V

Although light is a pervasive theme in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, the mirror symbol is seldom found. The two instances in the New Testament are well-known. In the first chapter of his Epistle James exhorts his readers to "be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if any one is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who observes his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But he who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer that forgets but a doer that acts, he shall be blessed in his doing" (1 : 22-25). James' letter is full of moral and spiritual counsel; here is a call to be active, not just passive, and serious, not casual. Whereas many exegetes and theologians claim that Biblical piety prefers hearing to seeing, it is worth noting that this author puts the two sets of images in concert. The non-chalant hearer, who lets the word fall aside, is likened to us who look at our natural faces in a mirror and then go on. You know, just a quick glance to see ourselves. If there are no surprises we pass quickly on. But we *can* look into the word with full attention (one French translation speaks of plunging one's regard into the word), and then we see more than ourselves. We encounter the other. And if we linger there and penetrate the word and let it penetrate us we will find freedom and a doing which gives joy. You realise, it is not a simple contrast between careless hearing and energetic doing. The first moment of doing is a serious looking; then, once the word has transformed the looker, there is the second moment of free service. The contrast is between, on the one hand, mere seeing and, on the other, seeing through, being seen through, and seeing it through.

To speak briefly on the famous verse from I Corinthians 13: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in

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8. Rumi, *Mathnavi*, quoted in Eva de Vitray-Meyerovitch, ed., *Anthologie du Sufisme* (Paris: Sindbad, 1978), p. 298. English version mine.

9. Titus Burckhardt, in his Introduction to Ibn Arabi's work cited above, p.16.

part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood." (v 12). In this chapter in praise of Love, love takes precedence over prophecy, speaking in tongues, and knowledge. They are partial and pass away while love is whole and endures. St. Paul points out two ways in which our knowledge is partial. First, it is by means of a mirror so the object is behind us. If the object moves we can easily lose sight of it. We can see only the side presented to the mirror. So, at best, a mirror-view is indirect and partial. And, second, if the mirror, traditionally taken to be the fallen human image of God, is not clean, our knowledge will be even more partial. Then, if the object is behind me and can see, it can see me. And St. Paul affirms that even though our knowledge is partial, we are known perfectly, completely. Paul speaks of a time when our knowledge will be perfect, face to face. What would that be like? Do we have a foretaste of it?

Before trying to answer those questions, let us look first at a very complex verse from II Corinthians. Chapter 4, verse 6 says, "For it is the God who said, 'let light shine out of darkness,' who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ." Now, even if we had no other evidence, we might suspect that the person who wrote that had a decisive experience with light! The new element that this verse introduces is that the glory of God can be known in the face of Christ. We can pair it with Colossians 1:15 which says that Christ "is the image of the invisible God."

The Greek word translated as "image" is "Eikon" and indeed this verse from Colossians is central for the doctrine of icons generated by the Eastern Church. This doctrine, like most doctrines, was defined in the course of a controversy, in this case the Iconoclastic Controversy, which simmered for four hundred years, and erupted in the eighth and ninth centuries. The iconophiles, those who advocated the veneration of icons, and the iconolasts, those who saw icons as idols, were in agreement on the Trinity, Christology and the sacraments. Both parties affirmed that in the economy of salvation the invisible God has become visible in Jesus Christ, the God-Man, in whom the divine and human natures are present without confusion in one person. They agreed that in the Eucharist the bread and wine become the body and blood of the Lord. They disagreed over whether the divine presence could be mediated through other material objects such as images

of Christ, Mary, the Apostles, and the Saints. The iconoclasts held that a genuine image must be identical in essence with what it portrays and that therefore no extension beyond Christ and the Eucharist is possible. For them a material representation of Christ was degrading to Him and possibly deceptive to the faithful. The iconophiles agreed that icons were not identical in essence with divinity, but they contended that the Incarnation could legitimately be prolonged through iconic representations. The icons presented a likeness of the divine object which, according to John of Damascus, is "a mirror and a figurative type, appropriate to the dullness of our body."<sup>10</sup> Whereas the iconoclasts held that worshipping the invisible God in spirit and in truth should be done through purely spiritual acts, the defenders of icons held that the veneration of icons can be edifying for believers with bodies and that the God made visible in Christ invites this additional means of being made present.

So the icon is not an idol, a literal picture of God or holy persons; it is not a natural representation. There is no effort to achieve depth perspective; in the famous icon of the Trinity bodies are 14 times as long as heads rather than the normal 7 times. Both in making them and beholding them, spiritual requirements govern. They are made in a context of prayer as an act of piety and obedience; the accent is not an originality or personal style. And how does this spiritual mirror function for the worshipper? It is a most extraordinary mirror. Normally a mirror reflects what is *before* it, reproducing the object. *The icon, as a material likeness of holiness*, shows we can say, what is *behind* the mirror. The viewer is not reflected by the icon; rather, the icon shows the "divine-other." The icon seeks to draw the spectator into its orbit, to begin a process by which we are fixed on the image and then drawn beyond it to the spiritual reality. The ordinary mirror is an instrument which gives a reproduction; the icon is an instrument which effects a transformation. Paul Evdokimov says that icons reflect "as in a mirror the glory of the Lord."<sup>11</sup> When the faithful soul is

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10. John of Damascus, *Orations on the Images*, quoted by Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 2: *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 118.

11. Paul Evdokimov, *L'Art de l'icone: theologie de la beauté* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1970), p. 160.

illuminated by this light, it in turn becomes light. Gregory of Nyssa says that in contemplating such a soul one can contemplate God. For the Eastern Church divinization is the goal of salvation. And a characteristic means of achieving this living divine—human communion is the iconic mirror.

## VI

By way of summary and conclusion, can we convert our reflection on the mirror into a prism so as to deepen our understanding? Let me try. From the broken mirror of Buddhism let us learn not to take ourselves too seriously. From the intricate Hindu reflection on reflection, let us learn that careful thinking can shed light on the mysteries of the Divine-human relation. From Islam, let us learn that the most insignificant bit of creation, just the fact that it is, is an occasion for seeing God. From the witness of the Eastern Church let us be inspired to be living icons of the Incarnate God.