



Seeing Things Differently

The great 20th century theologian Karl Rahner expressed the view that “The devout Christian of the future will either be a ‘mystic’ or he/she will cease to be anything at all.” Albert Einstein considered that “The most profound and sublime experience of which man is capable is the awareness of the mystical. In it lie the seeds of true science.”¹

At the base level, what both men are suggesting, it seems to me, is summed up by Evelyn Underhill, the renowned early 20th century writer and researcher into mysticism and mystics, when she defines mysticism in its simplest terms as “seeing things differently”. That is, in science, in theology, in our daily lives, we cannot become complacent and let old, familiar practices and thought patterns rule us. If we do, we cannot progress; and this is as true in our spiritual lives as it is in any other facet of our existence.

Great thinkers throughout history have dared to see things differently. Sometimes, they have had to wait a long time to be vindicated. Galileo is a good example. He dared to see the medieval cosmos in a very different way, going as far as asserting, contrary to the firmly held view of the time, that the Earth revolved around the Sun and not *vice versa*. Persecuted by the Inquisition for his views, he was finally exonerated in 1992 when Pope John Paul II officially declared that Galileo had been correct all along.

The medieval view of cosmology basically rested on the theories of Ptolemy and Aristotle. In this conception the cosmos had the Earth at its centre and this, in turn, was surrounded by the seven progressively larger concentric spheres of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn. Beyond the planetary spheres were, firstly, the *stellatum* – the area of fixed stars – and then the *primum mobile* which was the boundary of the physical universe. In the medieval, Christianised version of cosmology, beyond this outermost sphere (and thus, literally *outside* the universe) was the Empyrean or Heaven, the place of God.

This firm medieval belief in an ordered universe under God makes one of Julian of Norwich’s visions even more remarkable than we might first think. In her first revelation, Julian says that

... [God] showed me a little thing, the size of a hazel nut, lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed to me, and it was as round as a ball. I looked on

¹ This quote is a (near) paraphrase of one of many of Einstein’s ‘quotable quotes’. For details of these see, for example, Jerry Major & John Holmes (eds). 1996. *Bite-Size Einstein: Quotations on Just About Everything from the Greatest Mind of the Twentieth Century*. London: St. Martin’s Press.

it with the eye of my understanding, and thought: What can this be? And I was answered generally thus: It is all that is made. I marvelled that it endured, for I thought it might have suddenly fallen into nothingness because it was so little. And I was answered in my understanding: It endures and always shall, for God loves it; ... the reason that it looked so little to my sight was because I saw it in the presence of him who is the Creator. For a soul that sees the Creator of all things, all that is created seems very little.²

Here Julian goes beyond the medieval understanding of Earth's place in the scheme of things because she is not just observing Earth but is experiencing a physically, mentally and spiritually heightened view of all the cosmos, of all creation; she is seeing "all that is made". Her description suggests that she has travelled – at least metaphorically - in space to a place outside creation and the vantage point to which she is raised is the equivalent of the Empyrean, the place of God. Her account implies that, for a privileged moment, she is sharing God's view of creation. She is really seeing things differently.

Of course, we are very unlikely to have the visionary experiences of Julian of Norwich or the intellectual insights of Galileo but we can at least try to be more open in our approach to life. In particular, we can try to see others' points of view; we can try to step outside our comfort zones and reach out to people whom we might ordinarily avoid; we can embrace some new ideas and new technologies and see them as opportunities rather than threats. We can choose to grow rather than to stagnate. And, with any luck, we won't have to wait as long as Galileo for witness the fruits of our "new view".

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² My translation from (LT. 5 & 8).