Religious Studies **38**, 101–108 © 2002 Cambridge University Press
DOI: 10.1017/S0034412501005935 Printed in the United Kingdom

'Seeing-as' in religion: discovery and community

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Abstract: **'Seeing-as', or aspect seeing, is generally recognized as having significance for religion, especially so since Wittgenstein. Two questions arise regarding religiously seeing the world as God's creation: have the religious seen the world aright, and does the world religiously require a community that uses religious concepts? I argue that a particular strain of religious tradition provides us with a way to understand the issue of discovery, and that a traditional understanding of the power of God requires that a religious seeing of the world as God's creation, or a place of God's presence, can occur without there being a community that uses such religious concepts.**

'Seeing-as', or aspect seeing, has long been recognized as having significance for religious belief. Its prominence in philosophical discussions of religious belief over the last several decades can be traced to Wittgenstein's reflections on the category. Wittgenstein did not create the concept of 'seeing-as', but he drew it to our philosophical attention and used it in the exploration of philosophical issues and puzzles in the *Philosophical Investigations*, notably issues about perception.[1] It is fairly easy to see how the notion of 'seeing-as' might be applied to religion. The religious see the world in one way, the non-religious see it in another, and among the religious those in different religions see it in various ways. John Hick has made this suggestion, except that he has extended the category of 'seeing as' to that of 'experiencing as'. For Hick, 'there are different forms of religious experiencing-as', so that for Christians and for Jews and Moslems the 'world may be experienced as God's handiwork', while in Hindu traditions the world may be experienced as 'the cosmic dance of Shiva'.[2]

The religious – Jews, Christians, Moslems – may see a flower, a mountain, the day's dawning, and much more as God's creation. The event seen as God's creation may be something quite ordinary or familiar. 'Wonder', as N. K. Verbin says, 'is not necessarily at something unusual'.[3] With the dawning of such a religious

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412501005935 Published online by Cambridge University Press

aspect, one may see a flower, or a toothache, as a miracle, as an event embodying God's presence, as we might put it. It is not just events that go counter to the laws of nature, such as Lazarus being raised from the dead, or greatly impressive events, like a hurricane, or events that have defied explanation, like the movements of heavenly bodies, but the quite ordinary events of one's life that can be seen as miraculous. We can feel wonder at each of these. And, of course, one can feel wonder at there being anything, and come to see the world – all that is – as God's creation, or as Hick says in the language of the Psalms, as God's handiwork (Psalm 19).

However, wonder is not exclusively religious. A naturalist who denies there is a religious significance to the world and life may yet feel wonder, and if an aspect dawns for him or her, it may be that of seeing the world as a vast panorama that cries out for investigation.

'Seeing-as' and discovery

The question that arises is: who has seen aright, one who has come to see the world as God's creation or one who sees the world non-religiously? A further problem has to do with the fact that discovery, or seeing 'truly', relates in the right way to only some kinds of 'seeing-as'. If I fail to see the snake before me as a snake, but instead see it as a stick, I see wrongly what is before me. Similarly, if I fail to see the power in a Picasso painting (fail to see it as powerful), I may well have missed something and be seeing the painting wrongly, and, as John Wisdom appreciated, there are things that others can point out to me to help me see what is there to be seen so that I do see it rightly.[4] But discovery, where it is seeing truly or aright, does not always relate to 'seeing-as' in this way. Two people may entertain themselves by looking at the clouds, trying to see in them different things. One sees a dragon; the other sees a camel. One sees a bowl of fruit; the other sees a collection of keys. Each can say different things to the other to get the other to see the clouds as she or he does. But, while there may be failures of imagination, there is no failure to see the clouds aright in this case. It is not that the clouds are a representation of a dragon and not of a camel, or of a bowl of fruit and not of a collection of keys – as Picasso's painting is powerful and not lacking power. The duck–rabbit is between these two cases. The duck–rabbit can be seen as a duck or a rabbit, or both, but it cannot as appropriately be seen as an apple, for it is not a picture of an apple in the way it is a picture of both a duck and a rabbit.[5] Like the clouds, it can appropriately be seen in more than one way, but not in a multitude of imaginative ways. We see the duck–rabbit rightly if we see it either as a duck or as a rabbit, and if I see it only as a duck, I have still seen it rightly as a duck. If I fail to see the Picasso as powerful, however, I fail to see it rightly. Now which of these ways of 'seeing-as' is closest to religiously 'seeing-as'? I believe it has to be the way of 'seeing-as' in the Picasso case.

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For the religious, in religiously seeing the world as God's creation we see the world truly or aright, and in failing to see the world religiously – in failing to see it as shining forth God's presence – we do not see the world as it is. Many in the wake of a life crisis, or being moved by the beauty of what they behold, may come to see the world religiously, but so might various arguments and life experiences, or the onslaught of preoccupation, lead many to see the world non-religiously. Clearly, it cannot be getting someone to see the world religiously *per se* that is sufficient for us to judge that she has seen the world aright. For just as I can be brought to see the Picasso painting as lacking in power, when it is in fact powerful, so people could be brought, by hook or by crook, to see the world as lacking in God's presence, when in fact God's presence shines through it. And if coming to 'see-as' *per se* brought one to see truly, then in these last cases one *would* have come to see truly. The question remains, which 'seeing-as' is a seeing aright, or a discovery of the world as it truly is? Granted, this question may not be a live question for the previously doubting, newly converted, religious believer, or for the committed religious believer who has had a recent experience of seeing the world religiously. But analogously, on the other side, the person recently converted to, or committed to, a non-religious perspective may have no live question about his or her coming to see the world non-religiously. The question does remain as a live question, however, for those who, though they may be religious believers, are capable of viewing these conflicting 'seeing-as' experiences from an overarching perspective that endeavours to reflect the conflict between them. Thus, at least from this perspective, we can ask: which 'seeing-as' is seeing aright?

The tests for whether an instance of 'seeing-as' is an instance of seeing aright might vary from subject to subject. Of course, if we had an independent proof that the way someone saw something was false, that would be conclusive. If we had proof that what I saw as a gesture of friendship was in fact a signal for the assassins to move in, that would suffice to show that I did not see things aright. So, we might think, if we had a proof that there is no God whose presence might be seen in the world, that too would be conclusive. But there is reason to be suspicious of the efficacy of a 'proof' in this role. A religious believer might be presented with what looks like an airtight proof that there can be no God (proceeding from the consideration of evil, perhaps) and yet not give up religious belief, or concede that her seeing the world religiously is not seeing the world aright, for she may reason that the proffered argument must have left out something, given her own experience of the world as a place shining with God's presence. In the same way, a non-believer who is presented with what looks like an airtight version of the ontological argument might reject it on the grounds that it contradicts what she sees so clearly in her own experience of the world.

There is another approach to this issue. It is one that makes no appeal to 'philosophical proofs' or to logical demonstrations, and it is an approach that has its roots in a strain of religious heritage shared by Judaism and Christianity. I have

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412501005935 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in mind the, or a, tradition of the Psalms. In the Psalms, the fool says in his heart that there is no God (Psalm 14), and the wicked in the pride of his countenance holds the thought that there is no God, and says in his heart that God will not call to account (Psalm 10), and for the wicked, deep in his heart, there is no fear of God (Psalm 36). What prevents one from seeing God or seeing God's presence in one's own life, for this tradition, is not an intellectual failure or a failure to observe certain empirical facts, but the disposition of one's heart. We may put in this tradition Jesus' saying, 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God' (Matthew 5.8), and Paul's idea in his letter to the Romans that 'men … by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them … '. (Romans 1.18–19). In this tradition, human beings darken their minds through what they think and do in their wrongful ways, and so become blind to God's presence. Noting this tradition does not resolve the issue of whether the religious have seen aright in seeing the world as a place shining with God's presence, but it does set forth the issue in a distinctly religious way.

Furthermore, not all who have rejected religious belief in God have rejected this understanding of the issue. Nietzsche, in his criticisms of Christianity, did not accuse Christians of being unable to prove God's existence or of believing without firm evidence. To be sure, he believed that Christianity was false and that it denied what was real and what was 'natural'. His greatest criticism of Christianity, however, relates to what Nietzsche regarded as its 'motives'. What inspires Christianity and its morality, for Nietzsche in *The Antichrist*, is *ressentiment*, resentment and the secret desire for revenge against those stronger than oneself.[6] At one point in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* he varies his theme and says that it is 'weariness that does not want to want any more' that has 'created all gods and afterworlds'.[7] In either case, for Nietzsche, what creates religious belief in God is in the area of psychological need, a secret desire or wish: in short the disposition of the believer's heart. Nietzsche, as it were, addresses the religious sensibility in the Psalms in its own terms, accusing it of blindness to the truth due to the disposition of believers' hearts, just as the religious tradition of the Psalms accuses those who deny God of being blind to the truth of the world due to the wicked disposition of their hearts. Freud provides us with a similar analysis of the provenance of religious belief in God. In *The Future of an Illusion* Freud has it that human beings feel a need for security in the world and, wishing for the protection of a cosmic Father, religious believers project onto the universe what they wish for.[8]

Drawing upon a strain of religious sensibility found in the Psalms (but not there alone) we can understand the issue of whether the religious have seen the world aright in a new way (or an old way) that does not present it as an issue over the logical status of arguments on the opposing sides of the issue, but an issue about the disposition of one's heart, wish fulfillment and self-deception. When we remind ourselves of this way of understanding the issue of religious discovery we return the issue to a way of understanding that is itself religious.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412501005935 Published online by Cambridge University Press

'Seeing-as' and God's power

Wittgenstein distinguished among different types of aspect seeing or 'seeing-as', and he did not think that each type had the same requirements. For some types a familiarity with the applicable concepts was required, for other types it was not. In the case of the 'double cross' no familiarity with the concept of *cross* was necessary to see it as a black cross on a white background and a white cross on a black background. But in the case of the duck–rabbit, Wittgenstein says, 'You only ''see the duck and rabbit aspects'' if you are already conversant with the shapes of these two animals'.[9] Religious 'seeing-as', it has been thought, is more like seeing the duck–rabbit figure as a duck or as a rabbit: it requires a familiarity with religious concepts. 'Seeing-as' or aspect seeing, Verbin says, 'presupposes a community of discourse in a way that seeing does not'. Indeed, familiarity is presupposed. 'In order for me to see a picture as a picture of a duck', she says, 'I have to be familiar with ducks. In order for me to experience the dawning of the rabbit aspect, I have to be familiar with rabbits'. With regard to 'religious ''seeing-as'' experiences', in particular, it is important, for Verbin, that they not be thought of as 'independent of custom, upbringing and training [and] of a religious community in which certain religious concepts are used'.[10] Pretty clearly, one's religious community and upbringing help to determine the way one thinks of or would describe the object of worship, as well as religious practice, the language of prayer, and so on: in certain ways Vishnu and God the Father are differently conceived, and at least some of these differences derive from the difference between Hindu and Christian cultures. Further, it may be, as both Verbin and Hick would say, that religious concepts importantly shape much religious experience.[11] But Verbin's claim about 'seeing-as', as it applies to religious 'seeing-as', goes further. It asserts that, in order for a person to see the world religiously, as a place through which God's presence shines, one must have religious training in a community in which 'certain' religious concepts are used. In order to experience the world as a place of God's presence, one must be in a community that uses the, or some, concept of God, and one must be 'familiar' with that concept. This claim, as a general claim about 'seeing-as' of the duck–rabbit type, is not right, I believe, and if it were, it would have a grave significance for the way we should understand religion and the power of God.

The general claim is that 'seeing-as' of the duck–rabbit type requires a 'community of discourse' and familiarity, so that, for this type of 'seeing-as', in order for one to see A as B, one must be a member of a community that uses the concept of B and be familiar with Bs, or at least familiar with the concept of B. This general claim is not correct, even if it seems to apply in Wittgenstein's duck–rabbit example and in very many other cases. To see that it does not apply across the board, try this 'thought experiment'. Imagine a line drawing very like that of the duck–rabbit in *Philosophical Investigations* (194). However, imagine the drawing

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to have three projections, not two. Now we will not see it as a duck and alternatively as a rabbit. But we can see it, first, as a duck-like creature with three mandibles and, second, as a rabbit-like creature with three ears. And if we can do this (as we can with very little practice) it is without being in a community that uses concepts of such creatures, and without being familiar with either such creatures or their concepts. Of course, once we have gone through the exercise I have described we will have no trouble *forming* concepts of these creatures, but the experience of seeing the picture first as a picture of one, and then as a picture of the other, does not presuppose our having used the concepts or our being familiar with either the creatures or their concepts.[12]

Verbin's claim regarding religious 'seeing-as' similarly admits of exceptions, I suggest. We should regard the Psalmist, or the writers of the Psalms, as being deeply imbued with the traditions of Jewish understanding of the *Lord* God, an understanding greatly continuous with Christian understanding of God. Abraham, however, is different. Abraham stands nearer the origin of Judaism and the other Abrahamic religions. Abraham, the patriarch or 'father Abraham' for the traditions of Judaism and Christianity, may, in these traditions, be regarded as the initial human being chosen by God for the special relationship God would establish with Abraham's descendants in the flesh and, for Christianity, his spiritual descendants. Traditionally, God makes with Abraham a new covenant – establishes a new religion. To be sure, Judaism, as well as Christianity, would undergo much development, and, if we follow the earlier narrative in Genesis, we must allow that Abraham's belief and obedient response to God was not the first form of belief in or felt interaction with God. Still, Abraham in traditional understanding, stands at the origin of his religion in a way that the Psalmist does not. While the Psalmist's understanding of God is richly informed by his familiarity with the Jewish community's conception of God, this is not so for the founder of the community, Abraham.

It may seem, then, that Abraham is an exception to Verbin's claim that religious 'seeing-as' requires a community that uses a familiar concept of God. However, I do not want to press the assertion that Abraham in Genesis is an exception. Rather, consider the following case. Let us say that the community of religious belief that consists of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam dies away, as do all other forms of devotional theism, so that there is no body of believers that uses the concept of God in religious practice. There is no prayer of confession, no seeking of guidance from God, no prayer of thankfulness, no worship. These things are understood to have occurred, but they are regarded in the same way as cave paintings or petroglyphs are regarded: as artifacts from a former culture. On the kind of account that Verbin provides, no-one in our imagined new world would be able to see any event as a miracle or as embodying God's presence. A new community with its concept of God would have to develop before anyone could see any event as a miracle. What Verbin's account rules out is a new Abraham, in the

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absence of such a community, having an experience of the living God, of God's presence in the world. But why cannot God open the eyes of a new Abraham in our imagined land of asphalt and steel, as God made a new covenant with the first Abraham in the land of Haran? Why must it be beyond God's power to open a new Abraham's eyes in this way? Might it not be in God's power to recreate religious belief in just this way – by letting a new Abraham see the world as shining with God's presence – so that belief in God radiates out from this new experience, a new religious community then developing with a scripture, literature, practice and so on? For those like Verbin – or, rather, as an implication of the importance they give to community – none of this could happen.

We may think that it is all to the good to deny this possibility, given those who put themselves forward as messengers of God with the message that the world is to be cleansed of this group, or that group. Much better to require the continuation of community and tradition, we might think. But of course such new messengers can, and do, claim the mantle of continuation. The demand for communal concepts of seeing the world religiously does not rule out the religiously misguided, but it does rule out the power of God to open the eyes of a new Abraham in a non-religious community. It does so against both the general logic of 'seeing-as' of the duck–rabbit type and a traditional understanding of God's power.

Notes

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations*, G. E. M. Anscombe (transl.) (New York NY: The Macmillan Company, 1953), 193 ff.
2. John Hick 'Seeing-as and religious experience', in *idem Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York NY: St. Martin's Press, 1985), 27.
3. N. K. Verbin 'Religious beliefs and aspect seeing', *Religious Studies*, **36** (2000), 11.
4. John Wisdom 'Gods', in *idem Philosophy and Psycho-Analysis* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1964), 158–159.
5. Cf. Verbin 'Religious beliefs and aspect seeing', 6.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche 'The Antichrist', in Walter Kaufmann (ed. and transl.) *The Portable Nietzsche* (New York NY: Viking, 1954), 593, 625, 656.
7. Friedrich Nietzsche 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra', in *ibid*., 143.
8. Sigmund Freud *The Future of an Illusion*, W. D. Robson-Scott (transl.), revised James Strachey (Garden City NY: Anchor Books, 1964), 34–35.
9. Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations*, 207.
10. Verbin 'Religious beliefs and aspect seeing', 17, 18.
11. Others would agree as well. William Alston, whose approach to religious experience, or perception, is different from John Hick's, and who holds that religious experience *per se* is not 'conceptualist', allows that 'Adult perception [including religious perception] is typically shot through with conceptualization and belief'; William Alston *Perceiving God*: *the Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 187.
12. For Alston, something (A) appearing to an individual as (B) 'is, in principle, independent of any conceptualization or judgment'; it is independent of that individual taking A to be B, or believing or judging A to be B or even thinking of A as B; Alston *Perceiving God*, 186. For Alston, then, although '[a]dult perception is typically shot through with conceptualization', and judgment may require the application of concepts, we are able to see my imagined picture as a picture of a duck-like creature

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without a concept of such a creature and without 'any conceptualization or judgment'. With the idea that we might see an A as a B without any conceptualization, without the mediation of any concepts, Alston and others, notably John Hick, will disagree. The point that I wish to make leaves open this issue between Alston and others. The point is that we can see A as B without already having a concept of B, or being familiar with Bs. It is neutral regarding whether, in order to see A as B, we have in some way to apply some concept.

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