



Adapted from Frank Stella's  
"Sacramento Mall Proposal"

# Cracking Nuts or Peeling Onions?

Beyond the search for truth is the quest for God.

by John Hoyt

**N**AN-IN, A 19TH-CENTURY ZEN MASTER, ONCE received a university professor coming to inquire about Zen.

As Nan-in silently prepared tea, the professor expounded at length on his own philosophies and insights. Nan-in quietly filled his visitor's cup *and then went right on pouring*. Alarmed at the tea spilling all over, ruining the immaculate ceremony, the professor exclaimed: "It is full, no more will go in."

"Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are already full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"<sup>1</sup>

I was raised in a community that was deeply suspicious of the trackless swamp, the temporal abyss, that modern science seemed to open before us. Attending a conservative Protestant grade school in the late '50s and early '60s, I was offered the traditional Western account of

our creation by the hand of God in the relatively recent past. This chronicle began, so we were taught, as the first human being, created in the literal image of God himself, stepped forth into the shadowless light of that first morning.<sup>2</sup> Having a fixed beginning and ending, time was understood as an unfolding drama, a narrative whose outcome was reassuringly known in advance, yet in which each of us could aspire to play a significant role.<sup>3</sup>

Our understanding of the story of God creating humans served to define our relationship with the world around us. The biblical narrative, by reducing historical time to human dimensions, gave a familiar face to a cosmos that might otherwise be perceived as a menacing void.

## Drinking Up the Sea

**A**s a young college student, I became increasingly aware (as did many of my friends) of the inconsistencies that arise when religious faith is relegated to historical and

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prophetic time and banished from the living present. The institutionalized obscure God that I was offered in church and classroom seemed a shabby substitute for the dynamic, even surprisingly unpredictable deity that I had discovered in the pages of Scripture. Here was a God whose creative power could never be restrained by the covers of a book, but who acted in the eternal *now* of each of our lives. My teachers were, of course, compelled by their own educational background—firmly rooted as it was in the tradition of Protestant rationalism—to affirm the historical accuracy of the Pentecost experience, the vision of Ezekiel, and other such “mystical” texts. Yet, paradoxically, they were bound by this same tradition to an understanding of Truth that served, as I have now come to see more clearly, to bar the path to a knowledge of God.

Personal experience has led me to suggest the need for a reconsideration of our relationship with the text. Given the evident decline into which our biblical heritage has fallen, given the inability of many students to discover its meaning for themselves, it is not surprising that a number of educators have emphasized that *reading* must be a fundamental aspect of this relationship.<sup>4</sup>

Yet traditional models of reading lead us once again toward the fundamental paradox inherent in our understanding of the original creative act. Central to these “realistic,” or “common sense” models is the understanding that reading will lead the student, through an encounter with the mind of the author, toward a more accurate picture of the real world, one that will lend cohesion and meaning to the often-frustrating chaos of day-to-day experience.<sup>5</sup> “Reading . . . becomes a search for historical certainty, a nostalgic activity in which one attempts to recapture the original act of creation.”<sup>6</sup>

The Western understanding defines “truth” as the opposite of “fable” and “fiction.” *Truth* is a fixed, immutable Reality. In this model

truth is a hidden gem waiting at the end of a straight and narrow path. Because of the narrowness of the path, creative, imaginative thinking tends to lead the student astray. The teacher who has accepted this model seeks to guide the student along the most direct path toward this Reality, as embodied in the original intention of the author or, more plausibly, toward the only available substitute: the meaning of the text as defined by the experts whose views are currently accepted as authoritative.

The “realistic” model of reading, with its emphasis on the primacy of the text and the passivity of the reader, continues to dominate our approach to education. It was clearly encouraged by Newtonian science. In this model, the cosmos is but a vast machine, entirely reducible to the sum of its parts. Proponents of this model suggest that at last we have discovered the underlying grammar of the universe. Once an indecipherable tome of arcane lore, the deepest secrets of the cosmos have now been laid bare, and we have access to the mind of the Creator himself.

The Newtonian model may seem to work well enough on a macroscopic level, and it does seem to have produced results which confirm our illusions of control over the world around us. However, it tells only part of the story. Mystery is banished and with it play, creativity, and finally God himself. Both post-Newtonian science and literary criticism have begun to impress upon us that this model represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of the reader.

There is no mystery in a machine-universe. The concept of “mystery” itself is reduced to the level of an “unsolved problem.” Mystery as the dark silence behind all being and the deep, unfathomable presence that grounds all being is banished.<sup>7</sup>

In reducing the cosmos to our own dimensions we have ultimately *lost* the cosmos, “wiped away the horizon,” “drunk up the sea.”<sup>8</sup>

## Stepping Into the Void

Western religion has generally accepted this narrow, “common sense” definition of truth and allowed it to guide our search for God. This has led, on the one hand, to our reassuring emphasis on the historicity of the traditional reading of the Genesis story, which focuses on humanity as an object of God’s special interest, and grants them a key role as players in the drama of cosmic history. On the other hand, this same definition has ensured the incompatibility of our biblical heritage with the more “rational,” scientific story of the Origin which has, for most of the Western world, eclipsed the traditional narrative, dethroning God and casting human beings adrift in a decentered world. The elaborate historical structures that we have built around us are constantly threatening to collapse, leaving us alone and unprotected, staring into a dark abyss.

To those of us who stubbornly refuse to give



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up our belief in the ultimate meaningfulness of the beautiful universe in which we find ourselves, this void may in itself offer a key. The void may lead to a deeper, if less innocent, reading of the texts that have come to define us.

Western religion has taken a particular interest in the *word*. As we enter our churches, the relative absence of decoration and the orderly arrangement of the pews serve to direct our attention toward the pulpit: the service itself is, with rare exceptions, centered around the *kerygma*, the declaration of the Truth as embodied in the word. Yet this same tradition reflects, with some anxiety, an awareness that this Truth has come to us in a flawed vessel. Though the Hebrew text suggests that God once spoke to human beings face to face, this original transparency was gradually replaced by other, increasingly opaque, forms of communication. Language itself, struggling under the curse of Babel, serves as a veil that obscures our view of reality. These familiar biblical stories evoke our preoccupation with the “fallenness” of human discourse, which we too often overlook in our urgency to anchor our lives to an immutable “bedrock.”

Language is, indeed, remarkably “shifty,” subject to limitless plays of meaning that make truth itself the object of a seemingly endless search. Language is made up of words whose meaning can be fixed only by referring to other words (or “signs,” in the parlance of the semiologist), which in turn derive their definitions from yet other words. The search for ultimate meaning would seem to lead to an infinite regress.

The writer and theorist Umberto Eco makes this point clearly in his account of a dialogue between a medieval scholar and his aspiring young student, who are pondering the historical reality that lies behind the myth of the unicorn.

[Teacher:] True learning must not be content with ideas, which are, in fact, signs, but must

discover things in their individual truth. And so I would like to go back from this print of a print [an image of a unicorn in an ancient manuscript] to the individual unicorn that stands at the beginning of the chain. . . . But it isn't always possible in a short time, without the help of other signs.

[Pupil:] Then I can always and only speak of something that speaks to me of something else, and so on. But the final something, the true one—does that never exist?

[Teacher:] Perhaps it does: it is the individual unicorn. And don't worry: one of these days you will encounter it, however black and ugly it may be.<sup>9</sup>

Eco is not alone in suggesting that our preoccupation with the historical reality that underlies our traditional narratives leads, ultimately, to a black hole. As Alan Watts writes,

In spite of the vital power of its myth, Christianity began to die in the moment when theologians began to treat the divine story as history—when they mistook the story of God, of the Creation, and the Fall for a record of facts in the historical past. For the past goes ever back and back into nothing.<sup>10</sup>

Such reminders may well appear, at first glance, rather unpalatable to many conservative Christians. Christianity is, after all, generally understood to be a historical religion, one that promises certainty regarding future events to the same degree that it offers an accurate, reliable picture of the past.

While a thoughtful consideration of past and future does indeed have a place in a balanced religious education, we have too often allowed our pursuit of history to rob us of the meaning that our tradition offers for the present. Students who are asked to base their religious experience on a naively realistic reading of a historical text may take an initial pride in the knowledge that this reading seems to grant them a central role in the unfolding drama of cosmic history. But as thoughtful

students pursue their quest for historical truth, their initial illusions are gradually stripped away. "I thought it would be like cracking a nut," a young theology student told me recently. "I would break through the shell [the 'veil of language'] and find a kernel of truth. But it turned out to be more like peeling an onion. I kept pulling off layer after layer, until I was finally left with nothing but my own tears."

The "black hole" that the theology student found at the end of his quest for historical truth represents, not a dead end, but an "event horizon," a threshold which leads into a new dimension of time.<sup>11</sup> Just as Moses, Jesus, Paul, and other great teachers felt the need to begin their work with an experience of emptying (Exodus 2:15, Matthew 4:12, Galatians 1:17), so we must learn to enter into and learn from the encounter with nothingness that is essential to the educational process.

A visit to the desert is a letting go of all things that occupy one; therefore the desert represents a "no-thing" or a nothingness experience. One is refreshed in this desert; there one derives energy to carry on the struggle for greening and liberation. . . .

It is important that we make contact with our origins, and our origins are quite literally *ex nihilo*, from nothing. Every experience of nothingness, then, can prove to be a healing experience for us, one that makes us whole and returns us to our primary origins.<sup>12</sup>

Within the darkness of this no-time, the original act of creation occurs as a now, a present reality that banishes the illusion of past and future. Too often, like Nan-in's guest, we live in an endless flow of words that serves only to disguise our inner emptiness. In our eagerness to fill our cups, we have too often forgotten the lessons of the desert, the place where, as Scripture teaches, our illusions of knowledge and control are stripped away in preparation for a new act of creation.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Joseph Chilton Pearce, *Exploring the Crack in the Cosmic Egg* (Markham, Ontario: Simon and Schuster, 1974), pp. 13, 14.

2. Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 79.

3. In Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 153, 154, we read: "History . . . is essentially narrative. It has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The history of the West unfolds between limits set by the garden and the kingdom. . . ."

"Instead of a random sequence of meaningless occurrences, history assumes coherence as an intelligible pattern, comprising logical and lawful events."

4. As Allan Bloom observes in *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987), p. 60, "a life based on the Book is *closer to the truth*, [in] that it provides the material for deeper research in and access to *the real nature of things*. Without the great revelations, epics, and philosophies as a part of our natural vision, there is nothing to see out there, and eventually little left inside. The Bible is not the only means to furnish a mind, but without a book of similar gravity, read with the gravity of the potential believer, it will remain unfurnished." (Emphasis supplied.)

5. In Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (New York: Methuen and Company, 1980), p. 2, we read, "Common sense assumes that valuable literary texts, those which are in a special way worth reading, tell *truths*—about

the period which produced them, about the world in general or about human nature—and that in doing so they express the particular perceptions, the individual insights, of their authors." (Emphasis supplied.)

Understood in this way, as Mark Taylor (somewhat ironically) observes in *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology*, p. 84, the book "points beyond itself to the intention it embodies. To comprehend the work, it is necessary to return to the source from which it originates—authorial intention."

6. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

7. Matthew Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), p. 77.

8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Walter Kaufmann, Trans. (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 181.

9. Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose* (New York: Warner Books, 1980), p. 382.

10. Alan Watts, *Myth and Ritual in Christianity* (New York: Grove Press, 1954), p. 67.

11. In *ibid.*, p. 113, the following appears: "Look!" said Meister Eckhart. "The person who lives in the light of God is conscious neither of time past nor of time to come but only of the one eternity. . . . Therefore he gets nothing new out of future events, nor from chance, for he lives in the Now-moment that is, unfailingly, 'in verdure newly clad.'"

12. Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*, pp. 151, 152.