

Seeing is unbelieving

1 Kings 17; John 20:24-31

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Evensong: Octave Day of Easter

April 15, 2012

The year 2011 saw the appearance of one of the most overreaching book in a recent wave of books that seek to promote atheism. According to Alex Rosenberg's *The atheist's guide to reality: Enjoying life without illusions* science will help us to see things as they are, not as belief has mis-shapen them. Specifically, physics, he says, will give us "the whole truth about reality"; the explanation of human activity by Darwinian natural selection will explain all human behaviour; and neuroscience will dispel all of our illusions, which include not only the antiquated notion of a soul but even any notion of an enduring self (Rosenberg 2011).¹

Materialists, like Rosenberg, embody the spirit of Thomas as expressed in the reading from John 20. Jesus had appeared to the other 10 remaining apostles that first Easter evening, one week earlier. Thomas, however, was not with them. When the 10 had told Thomas that Jesus had been seen by them, Thomas refused to believe it unless he himself saw Jesus, unless he himself put his finger in the nail print, and unless he himself put his whole hand in Jesus' side.

Like Thomas, materialists have always said: unless I see, and touch ... unless my senses confirm it, I will not acknowledge it as real. This is not to say that Thomas was a materialist, or that he should be considered to be the paragon of all materialists and their errors. But, his approach does represent the slippery slope of the materialist error, which we can see in full bloom today in books like Rosenberg's. In the materialist framework, seeing is not just an admirable means of entry into the exploration and management of the natural world, but a dictatorial rejection of dialogue, an "imperialist" approach in which science provides the only answers that can be accepted, while "the lesser provinces of the intellectual and cultural world should take instruction".² This is why Leon Wieseltier, writing in *The New Republic*, calls Rosenberg's book the "worst book" of 2011: the view that science can resolve all questions, says Wieseltier, is not just nonsense but dangerous.³

Why dangerous? Think about Thomas's request. While many of us may share Thomas's desire for sight to confirm what others have seen, and while such a view is at the heart of the laudable progress made by the sciences, such a view, if it becomes the only way to see life, is destructive of the very stuff of life, such as dependence on others for being led to truth. Thomas's denial of the vision that the others had had

¹ For a review of Rosenberg's work, see the John Dewey professor of philosophy at Columbia University, Philip Kitcher's review in the Sunday *New York Times Book Review*, March 25, 2012, page BR31, also available as <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/25/books/review/alex-rosenbergs-the-atheists-guide-to-reality.html?scp=5&sq=rosenberg&st=cse>. The title for this sermon is taken from the title for Kitcher's review "Seeing is unbelieving".

² Kitcher, Review, BR31.

³ See Leon Wieseltier, "The answers", *The New Republic*, December 29, 2011, also available at <http://www.tnr.com/article/washington-diarist/magazine/98566/science-atheism-meaning-life>

of Jesus – that is, they too saw him --- suggests that Thomas must have concluded that the others were either liars or deluded: if deluded, they had been the subjects of mass hysteria; if liars, they had conspired to lie to Thomas. To follow Thomas's spirit is to doubt the word of those who have been privileged to see what others have not been given to see, for whatever reason. To follow Thomas would even spell the end of science in which scientists must consider what others have seen or concluded, even if they themselves have not seen what the others have. But more importantly for us, to follow Thomas is to doubt not only those who have indeed seen but also to doubt the promise that the Lord had made to his followers, unless that promise can be individually experienced.

When I was a young searcher for God, living in Spain, I once went hiking in the Pyrenees mountains. I had become lost. Yes, I was lost in the mountains, but I was also lost in terms of where I was in my life. My whole world had begun to collapse around me in the city and now here in the mountains I was facing death itself. I remember crying out to God not only to save me, but to make Himself known to me: show yourself to me, write your name across these beautiful heavens above the mountains. Make yourself known to me, and I'll believe.

He did not, and I did not know why. But, curiously, once I was rescued, I found myself able to listen in a new way to what Christian friends had been telling me for months. I had had no reason to doubt these faithful witnesses in the Evangelical community, but I had concluded that they were well meaning but somewhat deluded. Nevertheless, I said to myself, if I saw for myself, then I would believe. Yet it was through these believers that I eventually came to believe and stand before you today to testify to the gospel, even though I myself had not seen.

But, what if I had seen God in the mountains?

What if Thomas had seen, outside the context of the brothers assembled there in that locked room?

Would I have believed, had I seen the sky-writing? Would Thomas have believed? If I had seen writing in the sky, I might have rubbed my eyes and said: It's just an illusion. If Thomas had seen Jesus on the road, he might have fallen immediately at Jesus' feet but he might also have simply shaken his head and thought: it's just wishful thinking.

This is important because seeing does not automatically lead to the "right answer". Jesus himself warned against the value of the senses, even seeing, and of how deceptive they can be, of how even seeing can lead to the wrong conclusions: "Do not judge by what can be seen," he said, "but judge with right judgment" (John 7:24).

Right judgment is truly seeing, which is what, in John's Gospel, Jesus means by "believing". This incident with Thomas is a kind of mirror reflection of an earlier disciple who had doubted unless he saw. After Jesus had called Philip to follow him in chapter 1, Philip had gone to Nathanael and said "We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." (1:45). Nathanael had replied: What are you saying to me, you deluded man. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" To which Philip had responded, Well, if you doubt... "Come and see." (1:46) But, even before Nathanael had a chance to get to Jesus and see him, Jesus had seen Nathanael coming to him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!" (1:47) to which Nathanael had no answer, but a question: "How do you know me?" Jesus answered him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." (1:48). Then, in words reminiscent of Thomas', Nathanael replies: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (1:49). And then in words reminiscent of Jesus' words to Thomas, Jesus says to Nathanael: "Because I said to you, I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You shall see greater things than these. ... Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man." (1:50-51). In other

words, Nathanael, you will truly see. In other words, Thomas, believe and truly see what eyes cannot reveal to you, what no ear can possibly hear.⁴

To believe is not simply to take a leap into the unknown. To believe is to move beyond mere seeing with the eyes, beyond appearances, to grasp what truly is and to understand correctly. And that is true of both the physical world and the spiritual world, which are actually one world according to Scripture. Seeing truly does not mean creating some sort of artificial dichotomy between the physical or material world and the world of the spirit. Seeing truly does not mean throwing out science and reverting to a kind of pre-scientific theology. Seeing truly means thinking of the material world in ways that allow us to see it more completely than a materialist does, to see the whole of what is.

Think of it. You cannot even see everything that we know is happening within this room in which we find ourselves. You can see some things in this room, but you cannot see it being criss-crossed not only by visible light but by invisible gamma rays, television signals, wifi signals, and neutrinos.

In her most recent work, the novelist Marilynne Robinson writes about how the seeing with the senses alone makes us think we know all that there is to know. And, yet, she writes, “We all know that if we were the size of atoms, chairs and tables would appear to us as loose clouds of energy.” She concludes rightly that any understanding at all on our part of the closer world we inhabit or the larger world that contains all that is requires a truly theological view. If we were to see truly, she writes, we would see divine Providence at work in enabling us to make “a human habitation within the wild roar of the cosmos” (Robinson 2012:10).

I would say, indeed, that divine Providence is at work doing even more than that: not just making for us a human habitation in the cosmos but assisting us to read through the wild roar of the cosmos and to see the one through and in whom the whole cosmos holds together. That’s why these things were written: so that you may truly see, that is, believe, the one in whom all things consist (cf. John 20:30-31).

The real challenge for Christians, a challenge that is made especially acute at Easter, is to recognize that seeing alone cannot lead to belief. Rather it leads to our unbelief. What will lead to belief is to see truly.

I encourage you, during this Easter season, to pray that we might see more truly as God wishes us to see and to know how He, by the power of His life-giving Holy Spirit, enables us truly to see what has been, what is, and what always will be, to the glory of God, in a world without end. Amen.

Notes

M. Robinson, *When I Was a Child I Read Books* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

A. Rosenberg, *The Atheist’s Guide to Reality: Enjoying Life Without Illusions* (New York: Norton, 2011).

⁴ Cf 1 Cor 2:9-10: “But, as it is written, “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him,” God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God” (1Co 2:9-10 RSV).