



Which Way is Up?

Speculation about the Ascension
of the Lord

FRANK ARUNDELL

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Cover: NASA pix, Star trails 2010

INTRODUCTION

By the time one gets to the Ascension of Jesus Christ in the Christian bible you have come to the last few moments of the Messiah's time on earth in "modified," human form. If you are a bible reader, you have heard about the Annunciation, The Virgin Birth in the narratives and of the many miraculous actions Jesus performed while teaching the *Kingdom of God* in his three years of ministry. You have also read of the supernatural events that took place after the Resurrection; finalizing with the Ascension. There are two verses in the synoptic gospels: Mark 16: 19, and Luke 24: 50, and one in Acts 1: 9 which refer to that event. All three claim that the Apostles were witnesses to what is said to have been a physical withdrawal of the Savior from their midst as he was elevated out of their sight towards or into "heaven." In the gospel's of Mark and Luke there are no more than a few words telling of the event. In Acts, though, we are treated to the assistance of a cloud and the appearance of "two men in white robes" standing by the group saying to them:

"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

This elaboration is also considered to have come from the stylus of Luke by biblical scholars through the years. Jesus had told his followers more than a few times that he would return to his Father and our Father. All the references to "heaven" were always up. The only reference to being "lifted up" referred to

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his Crucifixion but also signified his Ascension. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church: *The lifting up of Jesus on the cross signifies and announces his lifting up by his Ascension into heaven, and indeed begins it.*⁽¹⁾ *Christ's ascension marks the definitive entrance of Jesus' humanity into God's heavenly domain, whence he will come again (cf. Acts 1:11); this humanity in the meantime hides him from the eyes of men (cf. Col. 3.3).*⁽²⁾

Jesus Christ, the head of the Church, precedes us into the Father's glorious kingdom so that we, the members of his Body, may live in the hope of one day being with him for ever. ⁽³⁾ This is the promise of Christ to those who keep the Commandments, love God and neighbor, especially those in need. The model for Christian behavior is, and always has been, Jesus himself. Every six year old Catholic child begins his or her formal religious training by learning why God made us: *"To know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and be happy with Him forever in the next."*⁽⁴⁾ These are the raw basics, since, as John says: "God is Love"⁽⁵⁾ we are all bound together by Love itself known through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The very last question in "Baltimore I," the children's catechism is: "What is Heaven?" Answer: "Heaven is the state of everlasting life in which we see God face to face, are made like unto Him in glory, and enjoy eternal happiness."⁽⁶⁾ This, is a very simple way of expressing the real purpose of every Christian human-life regarding religious belief; trusting in the promises of Christ.

We are told that this is a secular, scientific world where religious inclinations are fast fading. However, out of the approximate Seven Billion people on this earth only 2.5 percent

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or 140m are said to be atheists; that's the population of Nigeria. The rest believe in God in one way or another, in fact, one third of the world's population is Christian. "Ascensions" have a history, why would Jesus' be unique? We should have a brief look into it so we get to know a little better "which way is up."

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“In the depths I saw everything that is scattered in the universe, united, bound by love into a single book... I believe that I saw the universal form of that unity, because while saying it, I feel my joy opening out more fully... My spirit, suspended, looked fixedly, unmoving and with great attention, becoming more and more enflamed by the ardor of contemplation. That light so moves one that it is impossible ever to consent to turn away from it to a different view, because the good, which is the object of desire, gathers everything into it, and what is perfect in it seems deficient outside it...

Here my strength was not enough for the sublime vision but already, like a wheel moving steadily round, my desire and my will were directed by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars”.

Dante Alighieri (1265-1321): *The Divine Comedy, Paradiso*

“In Jesus we have defeated death, and are brought to new life. Christians, therefore live not only toward death, but always away from death.”

Hans von Balthasar (1905-1988)

“Christian thought and its long history of metaphysical speculation, did not occur as just another episode in the genealogy of nihilism; it was in fact so profound a disruption of many of the most basic premises of philosophy, and so audacious a rescue of many of philosophy’s truths from the impotent embrace of mere metaphysical ambition, that it is doubtful yet that philosophy understands what happened to it,

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or why now it cannot be anything but an evermore self-tormenting denial of that interruption.”

David Bentley Hart (1965 –)

The three clips that we have chosen to open this essay all treat our spiritual nature, but in different ways.

Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is a work of art. In this epic poem he travels through the three levels of the afterlife, finally reaching paradise where he describes God with an imaginary vision. “It is widely considered the preeminent work of Italian literature, and is seen as one of the greatest works of world literature. The poem’s allegorical vision of the afterlife is representative of the medieval world view as it had developed in the Western Church by the 14th century.”⁽⁷⁾

“Hans Urs von Balthasar was a Swiss theologian. He is considered to be one of the most important Catholic intellectuals and writers of the twentieth century. Incredibly prolific and diverse, he wrote over one hundred books and hundreds of articles. “Balthasar’s is a very careful argument, clearly distinguishing between universal salvation as a hope and universal salvation as a doctrine. He supports the former and rejects the latter. In sum: we do not know; only God knows; but we may hope.”⁽⁸⁾ Von Balthasar’s theological insight on the afterlife had a significant impact on the documents of Vatican II.

David Bentley Hart is an Eastern Orthodox theologian, philosopher, and cultural commentator; a particular favorite of mine. His book, *The Experience of God*, is a most eloquent, erudite work. Professor Hart awakens our sensitivities and our

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purpose in God in ways we human-beings unconsciously know about but seldom relate to, for instance: “Beauty— as opposed to mere strikingness, mere brilliancy— is an event, or even (one might say) eventuality as such. It is the movement of a gracious disclosure of something otherwise hidden, which need not reveal itself or give itself. In the experience of the beautiful, and of its pure fortuity, we are granted our most acute, most lucid, and most splendid encounter with the difference of transcendent being from the realm of finite beings. The beautiful affords us our most perfect experience of that existential wonder that is the beginning of all speculative wisdom.”(9)

These three clips deal with Psychology: the study of mind and behavior in relation to a particular field of knowledge or activity; Eschatology: not the end of the world, but the study of its rebirth instituted by Jesus and continued by his disciples, a historical phenomenon; and Philosophy: the study of the theoretical basis of a particular branch of knowledge or experience, an encounter with “transcendent being,” through the “beautiful” as expressed by David Hart and others.

There is a very wide gulf in the civilized world between determinists and indeterminists. The former, generally understand that all in creation is *material*, i.e. physical or matter, notwithstanding the fact that the substructure of what is known in reality cannot be seen with human eyes, but can be detected on the computer screens of atom smashers. It is enigmatic that no matter how far down they get in size there always seems to be some new undiscovered phenomena taking place ruled by the laws of nature. The scientific knowledge gained in nineteenth and twentieth century physics has

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dwarfed everything that had been previously understood about the physical. This, coupled with the Theory of Evolution, resulted in what we could call the new Religion of Science, with its hierarchy, its preachers, its followers as well as its institutional edifices. Those who preach the doctrines of science seem to want to prove God a fallacy, rather than stand on the principle of Nihilism. If matter is all there is, it got here somehow according to determinists; they just have not yet uncovered its origin. Their faith rests primarily on the conviction that they eventually will close the book of life with a definitive Grand Unifying Theory. As Protagoras said: “Man is the measure of all things.”⁽¹⁰⁾

On the other side of the gulf are the indeterminate, those who are immersed in the “cloud of unknowing,” who more or less follow the advise of Socrates: “The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing.” I would add: particularly involving things of origin. These people, in the eyes of the determinists are the ignorant, the childlike; throwbacks to earlier times before science advanced the post-modern understanding of reality. These are the people who believe that there was a “Creation” by a superior intellect similar to the one they inherited by becoming human. However, we are now beginning to understand, through the process of evolution, genetics, quantum physics, et al, that these inherent beliefs are in fact slowly proving true. Ironically, thanks to Darwin and ensuing science it has become clear that the order we see amid the complexity of nature and in particular human-nature is hardly the result of chance. For the indeterminate, spirituality permeates reality: in fact, *true* reality is spirituality. *Everything* cannot be reduced to the physical. At Creation, it was mind over matter. “Mind” the Creator; Energy and Matter the

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created. The genus Homo eventually evolved to a couple of Grand, Unified, Physic-o-Spiritual, Dependent Beings. Of all creation, unique to say the least.

Your intrepid investigative reporters have a question that they are prone to use in the course of their work, it is: “What did he know and when did he know it? This question with slight modification could be applied to ourselves: “What do we know and when did we get to know it? Even as an embryo we know things, or are definitely aware of things. The miracle is the great potential we are born to by being human. Desmond Morris, a Human Sociobiologist, titled his well known work: *The Human Animal*. However, we all know that when we became human we ceased being “animal” in the truest sense, although many of our animal characteristics and instincts remain with us. I have always thought Morris’ book ought to be called: *The Former Animal*. In the course of natural events our destiny was to become super-natural; human-nature was but the first step in that direction. Numinousness was added to animal-nature some time in our trajectory, that’s what becoming human is all about. Anthropologically speaking there had to have been a male and a female of the new genus: Hominid. “Any living or extinct member of the family Hominidae characterized, [eventually] by superior intelligence, articulate speech, and erect carriage.”(11) My inference here is that when the spiritual, i.e. the numinous, was joined in a specific advanced animal we became unique creatures of God; in his image and likeness. It is not too far fetched to speculate, theologically of course, that this event could have taken place in either newborns or adults of the species. Consciousness became self awareness in the pursuit of the Ultimate Good in the Spirit of

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Truth with total freedom of choice. The time had come for humanity to “inherit the earth.”(12)

“From one ancestor [God] made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘in him we live and move and have our being.’”(13)

“But this ‘intimate and vital bond of man to God’ (*GS* 19,1) can be forgotten, overlooked, or even explicitly rejected by man. Such attitudes can have different causes: revolt against evil in the world; religious ignorance or indifference; the cares and riches of this world; the scandal of bad example on the part of believers; currents of thought hostile to religion; finally, that attitude of sinful man which makes him hide from God out of fear and flee his call.”(14)

I would never expect a nonbeliever to accept either our theological speculations, or those of the Catechism of the Catholic Church with thousands of years of the Spirit guiding it through good times and bad times. Perhaps the philosophic thoughts of Socrates would be more acceptable for those whose tendencies are more secular, although Socrates was by no means an atheist. Had he been born three hundred years later he undoubtedly would have been an Apostle of Jesus Christ who brought all of his intellectual insinuations to reality.

“Socrates’ claim that the unexamined life is not worth living makes a satisfying climax for the deeply principled arguments that Socrates presents on behalf of the philosophical [essentially religious] life. The claim is that only in striving to

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come to know ourselves and to understand ourselves do our lives have any meaning or value. Again, goodness is associated with wisdom, making the life of the philosopher--the lover of wisdom--the most desirable life of all. If we refuse to question ourselves and the world, we will act without reason, unable to distinguish between good actions and bad actions. Without philosophy, Socrates might argue, humans are no better off than animals. The good life is one in which we make both ourselves and those around us happier and better off, and the only way to pursue that life is to pursue wisdom and self-knowledge. If Socrates were to give up philosophizing, he would be abandoning the examined life, and without wisdom or self-knowledge he would be better off dead.”(15)

The question must be asked, to what does this wisdom and self understanding attain. I don't know too many people who are so far outside of themselves that the only things they embrace are the sources of wrongdoing; of excessive pride and selfishness, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and slothfulness, etc., which have proven over the centuries to be more destructive of human kind than wars. Rather, humanity has been graced by the Spirit to recognize the presence of God in reality by his being revealed in the things created: and especially in the goodness associated with life itself, notwithstanding the travails and difficulties encountered along the way. The transformation from animal-nature to human-nature leading to the supernatural has given us all the possibilities wisdom has to offer. Understanding, knowledge, counsel, fortitude, a certain degree piety and a healthy fear of the Lord, perfect and basic virtues within the human breast. An existential attitude, a rejection of the Spirit, on the other hand, leads to cosmic hopelessness, a lost humanity whose purpose becomes purely self

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aggrandizement and the self satisfaction of materiality. Under these conditions it becomes fairly obvious that love as a creation of man alone has little meaning. The First Letter of John gives us some clarification:

“...Everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Anyone who fails to love can never have known God, because God is love.”⁽¹⁶⁾

Conceptualizing God as Love in the human psyche is probably as close as one can get in one's analogical imagination to the understanding of the living God in one's life, that is, until the Incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth where Our Father God is proved by Jesus' Resurrection. The faithful proclamation of that event rests solely on the grace of God received simply by a sincere person asking in the name of Jesus, and participating in the Sacraments of the Church he founded, particularly the Eucharist. Grace is, in many ways, Creation itself. Still, wherever there are two or more sincerely gathered in his name, he is in their midst. The love of God and one another is the only condition that provides meaning in humanity. Regardless of certain consequential and trivial differences among us, peace on earth can only be accomplished among human beings of good will.

Without the preliminaries of the last few pages it would be almost impossible to probe the pros and cons of the physical ascension of finite beings. There can be no two ways about it, you either believe in the numinous or not. Most human beings have some form of religious conviction in which the spiritual world is a fact of life. This understanding goes way back into pre-history. Myth is conjured and passed on from ancient

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stories in every culture, and is continually changing in character across time. Generally, percepts and experiences are exaggerated in the telling. That doesn't mean that some real facts are not connected to initial ideas or mental projections. Early man believed in gods of all kinds, that is well known from the art and artifacts seen in almost every major museum around the world. I think that it is also fair to say that today's scientists conjure up concepts in cosmology that could certainly be called numinous, evincing or expressing their belief in the absence of God in their reality. What exists came from somewhere even if that somewhere can't be explained. When smoke rose from burnt offerings and rituals, heaven (the home of God[s]) was firmly fixed as "up," but only in the transformed minds of human beings. Animals don't know up from Kalamazoo, except for the fear of falling. As a preposition, up is "to a higher place" from c.1500; also "along, through" (1510s), "toward" (1590s). Often used elliptically for go up, come up, rise up, etc.(17) In Latin it would be sursum, super or sursus. Thus supernatural as a higher nature; a higher level of being is not necessarily up. In cosmology for example, is the hypothesized ensemble of universes called multiverses, causally disconnected from and unobservable by us, out from us, or up from us, or what? Hypothetically they're there.

The word numen in religion is a spirit believed to inhabit an object or preside over a place: disembodied spirit: spirit. Numinous: Evincing the presence of a deity, a numinous wood, the most numinous moment in the Mass: sacred, etc. In this case the preposition in would be more appropriate than up. This is the word Jesus used to place the Father and place himself within one another. When teaching us to pray, he also said: "Our Father who art in heaven," leaving us to scratch our heads

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about where heaven is. Based on human experience we would naturally point up, but shouldn't we be pointing supernaturally "in?" Maybe both would be appropriate, since God is a Trinity and is everywhere according to the catechists whose understandings are derived from Scripture. At the Ascension, Jesus was witnessed to rise and disappear up into heaven, although his body was not in its natural state after the Resurrection. We will cover this in a little more detail in our conclusion.

If you persist you can always find a web site congruent with your train of thought. A researcher has to be very careful and double check all postings. The internet is loaded with tons of information and an equally weighted amount of mis-information. When dealing with numinous matters, special care is required since "spirituality" tends to be all over the lot. I have found one such site that appears to be careful both literarily and historically. It is called *Ancient Origins: Reconstructing the Story of Humanity's Past*. Several books I would heartily recommend as well is Jack Finegan's *Light from the Ancient Past, Vol. 1, & 2*, and: *Mircea Eliade's, A History of Religious Ideas, Vol. 1, 2, and 3*. With regard to Ascension, I will clip AO's opening paragraph on the subject, then their few examples of ascension events in mythology and the Hebrew Bible. Then follow with Islam, from another source, winding up with some thoughts on Jesus' ascension in the New Testament texts.

March, 2014 - John Black:

Ascension to the Heavens in Ancient Mythology:

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“The ascension of humans or beings into the heavens is a common theme among many mythologies and religions all over the world. Even though most people recognize the well-known ascension of Jesus, and the other examples of the Old Testament, it is surprising how many more have been described as ascending towards their ‘gods’. In this account, the word ‘ascension’ refers to entering the realm of the god(s), whether temporarily or permanently.(18)

I might add that when man got to a point in his evolutionary progress when “he knew he knew,” that is to say when he became human, his creative imagination was able to relate what he emotionally felt. He knew of a power higher than himself, a numinous power that had sway over him and all the things around him. In order to satisfactorily understand this force he placed it with him in his finitude, in his world; in the trees, the rocks, the wind, and so on. The stories connected with those elements was the birth of religion and mythology. When he created creatures like himself, the gods were born and became an integral part of his reality and remained so for millennia.

Hercules: (Greek: Heracles) Mythology

“Hercules, son of God Zeus and Princess Alcmena, who was also the wife of the King of Thebes, Amphitryon, was one of the most famous ancient Greek Demi-Gods. He was worshipped in many temples throughout Greece and Italy in ancient times and is well known for his 12 Labours assigned to him by Eurystheus, King of the Mycenaean stronghold of Tiryns – as ordered by Zeus’ wife, Goddess Hera, who wanted Hercules dead.

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In one of Hercules' adventures, Hercules killed the centaur Nessus for trying to assault his wife Deianira. But just before he died, Nessus set up his revenge by telling Deianira that his blood could be used as a love potion, when in reality it was poisonous and deadly. Deianira, believing the blood would deepen her love with Hercules, made him clothing from the blood of Nessus. When Hercules put on the clothing, his flesh began to burn as a result of the poisonous blood of Nessus. Knowing that his death was approaching, he asked to be taken to the highest peak of the mount Oiti to be burnt in a fire to escape his torture.”

“The event was said to have taken place on a hill over mount Oiti, just above the ancient city of Delphi. Hercules was thrown into the fire and, as this happened, a large dark cloud producing noisy thunder descended over them. After a while the cloud ascended again and to their surprise Hercules' friends realized that Hercules had disappeared. From then on it was told that Hercules ascended to Mount Olympus to be among the gods. According to mythology, Hercules got married to Ivi, daughter of Zeus, and remained on mount Olympus forever as an immortal.”

“Adapa – Sumerian Mythology”

“Adapa (or Adamu) according to the Sumerian mythology was the son of God Ea (Enki), the patron god of the famous ancient city of Eridu. Adapa was a demi-god who learned much of his knowledge through his father, however he wasn't immortal. Adapa was out fishing one day when a wind overturned his boat, causing him great anger. In his rage he broke the ‘South Wind’, a type of god, which was responsible for the event.

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According to the myth, the Supreme god Anu, father of Enki, called Adapa to account for his actions; for this Adapa was ascended to Anu's abode. His father gave him warnings of what he would expect when encountering Anu and guided him on how to answer his questions and how to fool the Guardians of the Gate of Anu's Palace. Here is how the account of his ascension is noted in the ancient Sumerian Tablet:

Adapa, the son of Ea, the wing of the South wind
Has broken."
When Anu heard these words
He cried, Help!" He ascended his throne,
"Let some one bring him,"
Likewise Ea, who knows the heaven. He roused him
... he caused him to wear. With a mourning garment
He garbed him, and gave him counsel
Saying: " Adapa, before the face of Anu the King thou art to go
... to heaven
When thou comest up, and when thou approachest the door of
Anu"...

“Enoch – Old Testament”

“One of the most famous ascension stories in the Old Testament is the story of Enoch. Enoch was one of God's favorite subjects. Patriarch Enoch was the great grand-father of Noah and the father of Methuselah. You will find him in the Book of Genesis where he is referred to as one of the ten Patriarchs before the great Deluge. According to the Old Testament, Pre-Deluge humans were said to live for a few hundred years. Enoch lived for 365 years, which was relatively short by the measure of that time.

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In Genesis we have the first reference to Enoch ascending with the help of God:

And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him. (Genesis 5:24)

The next reference is in Hebrews 11:5:

By faith Enoch was taken up so that he would not see death; and he was not found because God took him up; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God. (Hebrews 11:5)

In the latter, we can see that not only he ascended but he also became immortal: "...so that he would not see death".

If we now move to the apocryphal books of Enoch, we can see multiple descriptions and details of encounters between Enoch and God. These books are the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Books of Enoch. The most well-known is the 1st book of Enoch, which was discovered in 1773 by the explorer James Bruce, who retrieved three Ethiopic copies of the book in Abyssinia. The Book of Enoch is not considered to be part of the Bible or of the Hebrew texts.

In the Book of Enoch, we have references to the 'Watchers', Enoch taken by Angels to see the different levels of Heavens, portals, and many other mysteries that were forbidden to man.

"Elijah – Old Testament"

"Elijah's story is another fascinating ascension into the heavens, but this time through chariots of fire. Elijah (his name means "My God is Yahweh"), was one of the major prophets of the Old Testament. According to the Book of Kings, he had extraordinary god-like abilities. He could bring people back from the dead, make the sky rain with fire, multiply food,

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separate the water of the Jordan river (similar to what Moses did in the Exodus), and more, as mentioned in the scriptures. Elijah was a strong supporter of the new 'God' of the Old Testament and defended him against the worshiping of Baal, one of the Gods that the Jewish worshipped before the Old Testament.”

"And it came to pass, as they still went on, and talked, that, behold, there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and parted them both asunder; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven.”, (2 Kings 2:11)

“Even though it was written that Elijah was taken by God, according to the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible, he was destined to return with the second coming of the God. Elijah is also described in the Qur’an as one of the great prophets of God and the most powerful against the battle with Baal. Many more tales and legends exist describing the stories of mortals ascending to the realm of god(s), so many that you could write a book about it.

It is apparent from many ancient mythologies and religious texts that people with a ‘special role’ to play were always in direct contact with their God(s) and visited his/her/their abodes. What accounts for these similar descriptions across different cultures and ages? Were they simply the products of creative imagination? Or were the ancient people describing real events that took place? It is unlikely that these questions will ever be answered”. (By John Black)(19 With additions)

“Ancient Chinese Civilization”:

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“Chinese civilization is one of the oldest, continuous civilizations on earth. Early settlements from the Neolithic period (such as Banpo village) begin in the river valleys as they do elsewhere in the world.

The Shang (c. 1750-c.1050 BCE) is an early dynasty (succession of rulers of same line of descent) marked by impressive bronze technology and the beginning of China’s distinctive writing system”.

“Several elements found in Shang civilization remain important throughout Chinese history. These include: the notion of a supreme heavenly power (referred to as Shangdi, or “the God above” a personified, non-corporeal deity; later, by the Zhou dynasty, the term “Tian,” or “Heaven,” is also used); the belief in the power of the spirits of ancestors to affect events on earth; and the importance attached to rituals venerating ancestors and the role assigned to the king in performing these ceremonial rituals.”(20)

Although this clip doesn’t reference ascension per se, it does tell us a little about what one of the oldest Asian civilizations thought about the numinous and heaven, once again “up”.

“February 8, 2008, Aisha Stacey
The Prophet Muhammad’s Night Journey and Ascension”:

“The journey of the Prophet and Messenger, Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, by night from the Holy Mosque in Mecca to the farthest mosque in Jerusalem was a miracle granted to Him by God. It is the first part of a night of wonder and amazement, culminating in Prophet

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Muhammad's ascension through the heavens and into the presence of God".

"Glorified be He Who took His slave on a journey by night from Al-Masjid-al-Haram to the the neighborhood whereof We have blessed, in order that We might show him of Our sign. Verily, He is the All-Hearer, the All-Seer." (Quran 17:1)

It was a physical journey and all the events took place in one night."(21) (By Aisha Stacey)

It should be noted that the "rock" of the of the Dome of the Rock, *Masjid-al-Aqsa*, from which Muhammed is said to have ascended; is the same rock where Abraham was believed to have been stopped by God from sacrificing his son Isaac. It is also the location of both Jewish Temples, Solomon's and Herod's, and the exact location of either the Holy of Holies or the Altar of Herod's Second Temple destroyed by the Romans in 70 BCE. This is the temple where Jesus performed many of his miraculous deeds. Abraham is known as the father-in-faith of all three religions, the Jews, the Christians and Islam

It is interesting to hear what Islam thinks about the Messiah and his return at the end of times:

"Messiah is a name or attribute of Jesus, peace be upon him. Messiah means "blessed" in Hebrew, thus this name might have been used for him in admiration for his merits and virtues. It is reported that he was given this name for several reasons: he was protected from all kinds of sins; his touch healed illnesses by God's permission; he frequently traveled and made his message heard every where. Mahdi literally means one who

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has embraced the faith and has thus been led to the “straight path.” Mahdi also refers to the savior, who will come at a time when tyranny and injustice dominate all around the world; he will re-establish justice, make Islam dominant, and he will be a descendent of the Prophet (Ahl al-Bayt); (a member of the Prophets family,) peace and blessings be upon him.(22)

Christians, of course, believe that Jesus, the Messiah, will come again “to judge the living and the dead.”

The Jews, in these rabbinic times, look forward a Messianic Era where the one G/d of the Jews will re-establish Israel.

The Assumption of Mary, November 1, 1950

Sixty five years ago the Catholic Church dogmatized the Assumption of Mary, The Mother of God. On November 1, 1950, invoking his dogmatic authority, Pope Pius XII defined the dogma:

“By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, of the Blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, and by our own authority, we pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory”.(23)

Following the example of Pope Pius IX, who canvassed Catholic bishops before proclaiming the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, Pius XII asked all bishops for their opinion:

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"Actually God, who from all eternity regards Mary with a most favorable and unique affection, has 'when the fullness of time came' put the plan of his providence into effect in such a way that all the privileges and prerogatives he had granted to her in his sovereign generosity were to shine forth in her in a kind of perfect harmony. And, although the Church has always recognized this supreme generosity and the perfect harmony of graces and has daily studied them more and more throughout the course of the centuries, still it is in our own age that the privilege of the bodily Assumption into heaven of Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, has certainly shone forth more clearly."(24)

Obviously this is an undisclosed ascension of The Mother of God, (Theotokos,) into heaven by way of a declaration issued by the Bishop of Rome, Pius XII, believed to be a successor of Peter. "Upon this rock, I will build my church"(25) It must be understood that Mary is not worshiped, but is said to be the Mediatrix of all graces. "The title 'Mediatrix' is used in Roman Catholic Mariology to refer to the intercessory role of the Virgin Mary as a mediator in the salvific redemption by her Son."(26)

CONCLUSION

The split between the species is thought to have taken place about 6 million years ago. “Australopithecus made stone tools at least 2.6 million years ago in Ethiopia. Homo Erectus started making stone-tipped spears at least 500,000 years ago in South Africa. Archaic humans cooked food in a hearth at least 300,000 years ago in Israel. So far, the earliest evidence of religion come in the form of totemism or animal worship (like the bear cult) practiced by Neanderthals, some time between 100,000 and 300,000 years ago.”⁽²⁷⁾ When reason burgeoned, it was time for god or the gods in the mind of man.

Until Abraham, prehistoric humans worshipped their imagined god(s) in many different, symbolic ways.

“The Ancient Israelites settled the land of Canaan sometime between 1300 and 1200 BC. They traced their descent to a nomadic clan chief called Abram, several centuries before, [Approx. 2100 BC] who had migrated to Canaan from Mesopotamia. His descendants had then migrated on to Egypt. Here, according to their ancestral records, they had been mistreated and enslaved, before escaping en masse and moving back up to Canaan.,” the Exodus.

“When they arrived in Canaan, the Israelites brought with them a unique cultural facet, *monotheism*. For the first time in history, as far as we know, a religion had appeared which concerned the worship of only one God. By implication, this God was the universal God, the One who controlled all things”.

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“The Israelites developed a tradition of prophecy whereby a succession of men felt that they had been called by God to speak his messages to the people, not unlike Muhammed about a thousand years later.. These men came from different backgrounds, and clearly had different levels of education; but, in the course of warning the Israelites of impending doom unless they returned to obeying God, they developed a consistent religious philosophy that predicted the Messiah who would be the savior of Israel. ‘This revolved around a set of ideas based on the proposition that God was not just the one true God; he was also a God of love; that he required, not just religious ceremonial, but a worship of the heart, and one rooted in the ‘good life’ - a life lived with generosity, mercy and love”.(28) With the advent of the Messiah, out of Judaism sprang Christianity, the main religion of Western civilization.

“The civilization of Ancient Greece emerged into the light of world history in the 8th century BCE. Normally it is regarded as coming to an end when Greece fell to the Romans, in 146 BCE. However, major Greek (or "Hellenistic", as modern scholars call them) kingdoms lasted longer than that. As a culture (as opposed to a political force), Greek civilization lasted longer still, continuing right to the end of the ancient world.”

“The Greeks worshipped a pantheon of gods and goddesses, headed by the chief of the gods, Zeus. Other gods included Hera, Zeus's wife; Athena, goddess of wisdom and learning; Apollo, god of music and culture; Aphrodite, goddess of love; Dionysus, god of wine; Hades, god of the underworld; and Diana, goddess of the hunt.”

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“Greek religion placed little emphasis on ethical conduct - stories about the gods portrayed them often as lying, cheating, being unfaithful, getting drunk and so on. As in many traditional religions, a Greek god or goddess was seen more as a potential source of help, rather than as a focus of devotion”(29) Practically speaking, their gods reflected man’s nature.

Most people today, somehow and in someway believe in God. They believe, not because they have seen God, but because of what has been revealed of a higher-power in creation itself. In this way, God comes to them. Christians also tie their belief to Holy Scripture, both Old and New Testaments. The desire for God was planted in human-nature, and his purpose became known in Christ. From the brain to mind transformation, man was *and is* a spiritual being. Still, there has always been contrarian human beings. As man was gradually set free from animal-nature and acquired the gift of reason, he accepted the responsibility of discernment, and understood the difference in the grades of good and evil. He also understood that his freedom to choose was innate. “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth”.(30) The revolutionary and redeeming words of Jesus closed the gap between despair and hope.

The reality of God’s presence was presented to mankind in the Christ over two thousand years ago through the Jews. The Almighty Father, Creator of all that is seen and unseen; who was known to Moses as: “I am who I am,”(31) became the suffering servant for mankind. Proof of God rests entirely on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Word of God, prophesied from the earliest times is fulfilled in him. To

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believe him to be another prophet whose sole mission was to preach the love of God and one another, as the Jews had done under the law, misses the entire purpose of his mission. It suggests that the Paschal Mystery is suspect; that Jesus had only a human nature, and that all his miraculous works were bogus; falsely reported or exaggerated. St. Paul put it best:

“Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied”.(32)

This pragmatic statement from St. Paul in Corinthians puts it right where we live: the crux of the matter. “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile...” Paul was not with the little band of followers when he gave himself to us as “The Bread of Life,” or when they placed Jesus in Arimathea’s tomb; nor was he with them on the first day of the week when they found the tomb empty. He was not at the tomb when Jesus spoke to Mary Magdalene, or on the Jerusalem street when he greeted the women according to the gospel. He was not in the Upper Room when Thomas was convinced that he met the risen Christ by placing his hand in the wound the Roman lance had made. This is precisely why he could write to us as one of

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us. “Those who have not seen and have believed”(33). However, there is more. Paul humbly tells us that the Lord also appeared to him:

“For I delivered unto you first of all that which also I received: that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried; and that he hath been raised on the third day according to the scriptures; and that he appeared to Cephas; then to the twelve; then he appeared to above five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain until now, but some are fallen asleep; then he appeared to James; then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to the child untimely born, he appeared to me also. For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not found vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. Whether then it be I or they, so we preach, and so you believed”.(34)

The human mind alone does not have the capability to accept the numinous out of hand, regardless of the fact that it can project beyond itself in imaginary ways, ways that Aquinas would call phantasms. In other words it is open to understandings beyond its physical and practical self but knows that phantasmagoria is not in it's worldly reality. There is a big difference between the mental illness of living in a false reality, and being gifted with a creative imagination in the real world. Therein lies the basic argument between determinists and indeterminists.

The “grace of God” which Paul speaks about cannot be generated by human mental processes. Consciousness of the

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numinous both outside and inside of the self can be called “sharing in the life of God.” For every “believer” grace clarifies what, without it, would be difficult and vague understandings of spirituality. Paul makes another point: That in the Spirit, grace may be transmitted by the Word of God from the witness of the apostles in the biblical texts to the hearer. “Blessed are they who hear the word of God and keep it”.⁽³⁵⁾ This is what makes the bible such a Holy Book, but not the only way by which grace is obtained. Faith, a trusting self commitment, “the assurance of things hoped for,”⁽³⁶⁾ is entirely dependent on the grace of God. It is simply the *desire* for God that is written on the human heart,⁽³⁷⁾ the choice has always been our own.

I don't know of any human being that can fly without a seat on Southwest Airlines, a Jet Suit, or as one of the crew on the International Space Station; with the exception of magicians faking levitation or a few saints who were observed doing so in reality. Isaac Newton's gravity usually keeps our feet on the ground. There is definitely a physical “down” depending on the mass of the heavenly body you happen to be living on.

I think we can all agree that although there may have been a few true facts connected with ancient stories, they later became myths; the gods of the classical Greeks were, by and large, the results of some very creative minds. Hesiod, in the Theogony, gives us a rundown on the super heroes and heroins of the great “soap-operas” of Greek mythology fulfilling their human need for the super-human deity.

In Sumerian mythology, “Gilgamesh is the central character in the metaphoric poem "Epic of Gilgamesh", the greatest

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surviving work of early Mesopotamian literature. In the epic his father was Lugalbanda and his mother was Ninsun, a goddess. In Mesopotamian mythology, Gilgamesh is a demigod of superhuman strength who built the city walls of Uruk to defend his people from external threats, and travelled to meet the sage Utnapishtim, who had survived the Great Deluge... He is usually described as two-thirds god and one third man. The earliest Sumerian poems are now generally considered to be distinct stories rather than parts of a single epic. They date from as early as the Third Dynasty of Ur (2150-2000 BC).”(38) When Adapa was said to confront Anu, no vehicle was provided, although heaven was surely “up”.

It must be remembered that the city of Ur is the place that Abraham left about (1812 BCE). “Abraham lived in Ur for a total of seventy years. He then accompanied his father and the entire family to the city of Haran. His older brother Haran, the father of Lot, died in Ur sometime before this migration took place. After living in the city five years Terah dies at the age of 205. Soon after this event God tells Abram (Genesis 12:1-2), who is now 75 years old, to leave Haran and take his family to the land of Canaan (the land of promise). He then makes a startling promise to Abram. God says that he will bless those who bless him and curse those who curse him (Genesis 12:3).”(39) The bible doesn’t tell us exactly how God spoke to Abraham but it is quite clear that his promptings were extrinsic as opposed to the personal creative imaginings of the “story tellers.” The reason we can trust the scripture in the case of Abraham are twofold. First, three quarters of the world’s population depend on Abraham’s connection with the One God based on the historic outcome that the three major religions present today, save for the contrarians in those faiths. Secondly,

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Jesus, almost two thousand years later, corroborated the fact: *“Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad”... “Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am.’”*⁽⁴⁰⁾ If one doesn’t believe the words of Christ, I submit that he or she may have missed something of crucial, historic significance. Had Abraham accepted the gods of Ur there would be no Judaism, without Judaism there would be no Christianity, no Islam; the world would be a very different place. It is also true that all three “faiths” experienced corruption from within by human contrarians.

I believe that God has always meant for us to participate in his life. God has never been at war with his creatures— It was his free, contrarian creatures who, right from the brain to mind transformation, were at war with the God that freed them from animal nature.

The Ten Commandments finally presented by Moses have been a part of human-nature in one form or another from the very early days of human cognition; they are the basic keys to law, order, peace and security among Homo Sapiens Sapiens. Those who believe they are merely cultural notions, risk not only self destruction but by ignoring them, the destruction of the culture in which they live. They may be summed up with the most important message ever given to humankind: *Love God, love your neighbor as yourself*. In my opinion this is not an impossible dream just yet. However, Love is continually being besieged by humanly generated negativity and hate.

When God was said to take Enoch in the OT, Paul tells us it was because of his faith. Paul was making a plea to the

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Hebrews, of which he was one, regarding the conviction of “things not seen.” Paul continued:

“Indeed, by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible”.
(41)

Anyone who has taken the time to look into the Big Bang understands this verse. In Hebrews, Paul was giving them a complete rundown of the faith they knew, and which he knew intimately. He was leading them to a new faith, indeed a new covenant, which Jesus offered them. He got to it in Hebrews 13, well worth reading again, with its well known lines in verse 7:

“Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you; consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever. Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings; for it is well for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations about food, which have not benefited those who observe them”.(42)

It is only in the apocrypha of Enoch that we see the writer’s imagination at work Here are some abstracts from that book:

... This place is the prison of the angels, and here they will be imprisoned for ever ...

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... And here I saw three portals of heaven open in the heaven: through each of them proceed north winds: when they blow there is cold, hail, frost, snow, dew, and rain....

... And it came to pass after this that my spirit was translated. And it ascended into the heavens: And I saw the holy sons of God. They were stepping on flames of fire: Their garments were white. And their faces shone like snow. ...

... And I saw there as it were a structure built of crystals, And between those crystals tongues of living fire ...

... And I saw angels who could not be counted, A thousand thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand, Encircling that house ... (Book of Enoch)” Less poetic but similar in many ways to the Paradiso.

As one of the major prophets of the OT we are treated to a description of Elijah’s flaming chariot and his trip to heaven in a whirlwind. The marvelous and bizarre stories of the kings of Israel, (David, Solomon, Jeroboam, etc) The Book of Kings, is a storehouse of plots for a thousand modern novels. In Elijah’s and Elisha’s case it was the staunch defense of the God of Israel against his enemies, particularly Baal, that brought him to prominence. Elijah was said to perform many spectacular supernatural acts, all in the name of the Lord.

Jesus used some of them to make a point in his preaching of the Kingdom of God.

Separating fact from fiction is always difficult in literature. An editor I once knew said that no matter how bizarre the story is, there has to be some truth in it to be believed; even as entertainment fiction it cannot be totally insane, some sense of credibility must be maintained. Elijah is known to us as a human being with extraordinary powers of prophesy. The

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stories may be phantasy, but the lessons derived from them do make a connection with the Evangelists involving the power of God in those with faith and persistence.

When Ms. Stacey P. 16 above, says that the Prophet Muhammed's Night Journey to the farthest Mosque (Mosjid) in Jerusalem was a physical journey all in one night; we can only say that it has similarities to Elijah's journey. Elijah's in a fiery chariot assisted by a whirlwind similar to the one that took Dorothy to Oz; as opposed to Muhammed's trip on a diminutive white horse called el Buraq. "The Islamic biography of the Prophet Muhammad's life is very complete and it very clearly does not mention his leaving the Arabian Peninsula, much less voyaging to Jerusalem. Therefore, when Karen Armstrong, a specialist on Islam, writes that 'Muslim texts make it clear that ... the story of Muhammad's mystical Night Journey to Jerusalem ... was not a physical experience but a visionary one,' she is merely stating the obvious. Indeed, this phrase is contained in an article titled, 'Islam's Stake: Why Jerusalem Was Central to Muhammad' which posits that 'Jerusalem was central to the spiritual identity of Muslims from the very beginning of their faith.' Not good enough."

"Armstrong found herself under attack for a 'shameless misrepresentation' of Islam and claiming that 'Muslims themselves do not believe the miracle of their own prophet'... "When this Qur'anic passage was first revealed, in about 621, a place called the Sacred Mosque already existed in Mecca. In contrast, the 'furthest mosque' was a turn of phrase, not a place. Some early Muslims understood it as metaphorical or as a place in heaven. And if the 'furthest mosque' did exist on earth, Palestine would seem an unlikely location".(43)

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Mary became pregnant with Jesus under questionable conditions. Even her betrothed decided to divorce her quietly (informally) so as not to cause her disgrace. Matthew's gospel tells the story:

*“Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us.’ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; * and he named him Jesus”.*(44)

The more “scientific” the world gets the less this story is believed. Physically, it is impossible for a woman to bear a child without male sperm; but are we talking physicality here? Human beings have understood and accepted the numinous for thousands of years. Spirituality has always been part of our physical existence, In fact it is what makes us human. We can deny it, we can say we don't *think* by transcending the physical, but of course we do. The mind, with its reason and will with

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it's memory and imagination is much more than a physical structure. There is a reason "mind" is said by some to have emerged from the physical. To this day that reason is still unclear. Consciousness, and particularly self consciousness, is still one of the great mysteries of creation. Regardless of what many scientists say about the non-existence of God, there are as many or more who hold the opposite opinion, since happenings of a spiritual nature are prevalent. We have all but proved, scientifically, the Big Bang Theory; still, it is human nature (very different from nature itself, but related) to probe beyond itself. We're calling some of the mathematics resulting from that inquisition– beautiful, because of the undeniable order which the cosmos displays: only discoverable, of course, by amazed human beings. You cannot claim faith without grace, and grace is not understood without spirituality.

Ancient texts can tell you the story of the Jews, of Jesus of Muhammed or Hercules, but only the stories that bear witnesses are those that seem to hold credibility. The Holy Bible appears to be backed up by solid tradition, as well as being both spiritually and historically correct. I believe the Father was proven by the Son both in Spirit and in truth. With the grace of God still we have the desire for God planted securely in our "hearts" the same as it was in the first man and woman who would be called human.

Starting with the Assumption all the way through to the Ascension the works Jesus performed were not in a cave or not a writing desk. They were open for all to see, hear and experience. Though there are minor aberrations, generally all four gospels conform with one another depending whom they were addressing. From the changing of water to wine at the

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Marriage Feast of Cana at the behest of his mother, to the departure in a glorified numinous state, everything he did was witnessed by people like us. Prepositions like up, in, out, etc., matter little. The Evangelists saw what they saw— and used the the words they knew. Newton had not yet given us Gravity, nor Einstein, Spacetime. Jesus allowed himself to be seen for forty days in a “glorified state” before he disappeared from our sight.

I thought a quote from Niels Bohr would be appropriate:

“Nowadays, the individual seems to be able to choose the spiritual framework of his thoughts and actions quite freely, and this freedom reflects the fact that the boundaries between the various cultures and societies are beginning to become more fluid. But even when an individual tries to attain the greatest possible degree of independence, he will still be swayed by the existing spiritual structures — consciously or unconsciously. For he, too, must be able to speak of life and death and the human condition to other members of the society in which he's chosen to live; he must educate his children according to the norms of that society, fit into its life. Epistemological sophistries cannot possibly help him attain these ends. Here, too, the relationship between critical thought about the spiritual content of a given religion and action based on the deliberate acceptance of that content is complementary. And such acceptance, if consciously arrived at, fills the individual with strength of purpose, helps him to overcome doubts and, if he has to suffer, provides him with the kind of solace that only a sense of being sheltered under an all-embracing roof can grant. In that sense, religion helps to make social life more harmonious; its most important task is to

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remind us, in the language of pictures and parables, of the wider framework within which our life is set”.

“Niels Henrik Bohr (7 October 1885 – 18 November 1962) was a Jewish Danish physicist. He received the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1922 for his contributions which were essential to modern understandings of atomic structure and quantum mechanics”. (45)

Here, Niels Bohr sees faith as a bit of a crutch, a solace. Perhaps the words of Jesus bear more significance:

“If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would not have sin; but now they have both seen and hated Me and My Father as well”.(46)

“When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning”.(47)

NOTES

- 1, Catechism of the Catholic Church, 662
2. Ditto, 665
3. Ditto, 666
4. Baltimore Catechism I (1885), p 1, q 6
5. John 4:8
6. Baltimore Catechism 1 p 44, q 420
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14. Ditto, Ch. I, 29
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25. Matthew 16: 18
26. ESPN, Assumption
27. Eupedia, Timeline of Human Evolution
28. Time Maps, Ancient Israel
29. Time Maps, Ancient Greece
30. John 4: 24

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31. Exodus 3: 14
32. 1 Corinthians 15: 12-19
33. John 20: 29
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35. Luke 11: 28
36. Hebrews 11; 28
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44. Matthew 1: 18
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46. John 15: 24
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