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Thomas F. Ryan

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Vision and Spirituality in Post-Katrina New Orleans

Thomas F. Ryan[1]

INTRODUCTION

Katrina was not the first storm to flood New Orleans, and President George W. Bush was not the first to regard the city's destruction from Air Force One. Hurricane Betsy had hit almost forty years earlier.[2] The next afternoon, on September 10, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson flew to New Orleans, and a photograph captures him viewing the city from the presidential airplane.[3] Four other officials surround him as he looks out the window at the flooded city below.[4] However, they did more than just fly over; President Johnson and his companions landed at the airport, drove through the disaster zone, and met with storm victims.[5] Johnson expressed his desire to see the destruction in person: "I am here because I wanted to see with my own eyes what the unhappy alliance of wind and water have done to this land and its people."[6] Soon thereafter, he signed a bill that would encircle the city with levees in order to prevent future destruction on the same scale.[7]

Almost forty years later, on Monday, August 29, 2005, Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans.[8] Two days after landfall, President Bush flew from his ranch in Crawford, Texas to Washington, D.C.[9] Along the way, his 747 dipped as low as seventeen hundred feet so that he could survey damage to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast.[10] A color photograph catches him alone, almost "as [a] tourist," staring at the ruin below with an expression of concern and a hint of incredulity.[11] However, he would not set foot in New Orleans until Friday, September 2, when he spoke to the press after an aerial tour of the city: "I want you to know that I'm not going to forget what I've seen. I understand the devastation requires more than one day's attention.

This is . . . one of the worst natural disasters we have faced, with national consequences. And therefore, there will be a national response."[12] This quote illustrates how President Bush connected *vision*, *knowledge*, and *action*; he claimed that what he saw enhanced his understanding and would result in a response.

This article proposes that vision serves as a catalyst for action as part of a spirituality for visitors to post-Katrina New Orleans. First, a word on two related terms—*theology* and *spirituality*—that will surface periodically in the article. "Faith seeking understanding" is a classic definition of theology associated with the eleventh-century Anselm of Canterbury.[13] In this context, Christian theology is, put simply, the ongoing effort to expand knowledge about deeply held, but perhaps inarticulable, religious beliefs. While many of the Christian tradition's great theologians have pursued theology not as an endeavor abstracted from reality, but rather as an attempt to elaborate faith's implications for new times and new challenges, for too many, theology has remained at the intellectual level—an exercise aloof from life's practical concerns.[14] The discourse of spirituality often represents a critique of theology's inattentiveness to life's realities, but a single definition of spirituality remains elusive.[15] Elaborating on Anselm's definition of faith seeking understanding, a definition that encompasses the practical application of theology could be restructured as "faith seeking embodiment." Such a definition has a pragmatic ring and acknowledges that spirituality is faith as lived out by people on the physical plane. Yet, intellectual reflection on faith—theology—can contribute to the elaboration of faith's implications for life—spirituality. In this article and after an extended review of differing accounts of vision from medieval theologians to present-day postmodernists, I will propose a spirituality for visitors to post-Katrina New Orleans. It is based in part on the notion of vision as a transformative experience and as a catalyst for action in response to the devastation of the city's social fabric and physical infrastructure.

HURRICANE KATRINA

A cursory review uncovers such image-motivated action in the wake of Katrina. Many Americans were moved by the images they saw, in print and on television, of poverty, despair, suffering, and death unevenly distributed along economic and racial lines.[16] They reacted by contributing large sums of money and descending on the city by the thousands to help rebuild it.[17] Yet vision in and of itself does not necessarily lead to effective action. For example, on its popular Hurricane Katrina bus tour, "America's Worst Catastrophe," sightseeing bus company Gray Line continues to steer its passengers "past an actual levee that breached" in order to "see the resulting devastation that displaced hundreds of thousands of U.S. residents."[18] Gray Line identifies the goals it seeks to achieve with its tour as "amazement and understanding."[19] Surely understanding is good, but on its own falls short of action.

This article is addressed to neither of the groups mentioned above for whom vision provoked action, nor to those for whom it simply generated amazement or understanding. It is directed instead to those for whom vision poses difficulties—those who want to contribute to New Orleans's rebirth and who can discern a way of doing so by visiting, but who have hesitated to do so out of fear of voyeurism, sensationalism, or fear of becoming "misery tourists."[20] I am unsure how many people this last group comprises, but numerous acquaintances have expressed this concern to me. Moreover, this is not a surprising concern, given the deep ambivalence about vision in Western culture, and it may well be widespread.[21] Finally, it is an especially problematic concern for New Orleans, which relies so heavily on tourists.[22] Thus, to hold that vision is problematic would strike at the very reason why many travel to New Orleans and therefore likely affecting a large part of its economy. I respond to this problem by presenting the case against vision in contemporary thought, by highlighting resources that present vision as transformative, and by sketching the outline of a spirituality for visitors to post-Katrina New Orleans. In sum, viewing a

disaster *can* be voyeuristic, but it need not be. Instead, it can transform viewers and move them to action that results in enduring social change.

I. THE GAZE IN RECENT THOUGHT

One way to explain the hesitation of someone who wants to visit New Orleans is to review western culture's ambivalence towards vision. Existing critiques of the "tourist vision" often rely on an analysis of tourists' *gaze*. Before turning to a more positive notion of vision, I develop at some length the meaning of gaze based on three recent understandings of this term that build upon each other.[23] These analyses share a concern for the impact of the viewer upon the viewed—to the detriment of the latter—and have implications that shed light on the reluctance of some to visit New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina.

Postmodern theorist Michel Foucault develops a foundational account of the gaze in *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, in which he uses "gaze" to describe the apparently unmediated method of diagnosis advocated by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century medical theorists.[24] Foucault speaks of the "suzerainty"[25] and "sovereignty"[26] of the gaze, the "absolute"[27] and "unprejudiced"[28] gaze, a gaze "free at last of systems and speculations,"[29] "a pure gaze, prior to all intervention and open to the immediate."[30]

Foucault devotes his book to a critique of these positions,[31] a critique with special implications for visitors to New Orleans. Put simply, there is no unmediated vision; instead, preconceptions affect vision.[32] In medical terms, theory affects how physicians view their patients, opening up new perspectives on health and illness.[33] For example, disease looks different when it is viewed as part of a "metaphysic of evil";[34] within this framework, it seems like divine punishment for sinful behavior. Other theorists have compared diseases to the plant kingdom and described them with language analogous to botanical taxonomy with genera, species, etc.[35] Disease appears otherwise in a later nominalistic perspective that dismisses

the existence of a disease; as in nominalism, the disease itself does not exist but is simply a name constructed to make sense of a constellation of symptoms that do in fact exist.[36] In every case, these linguistic and theoretical frameworks fund new ways of seeing that are not, however, unbiased.

Inattentiveness to how language and theory influence what we see leads to Foucault's main criticism of the medical gaze—its dehumanizing effect on the patient, the seen. At times, sight inflected by theory has led physicians to focus so intently on the disease that the sick person becomes subsumed. Therefore, Foucault claims that at times, "[i]n order to know the truth of the pathological fact, [physicians had to] abstract the patient."[37] Within this framework of vision, the patient can become an obstacle to knowledge about the disease, so "one must subtract the individual[s] with [their] particular qualities."[38] The physician "'soon discovers [disease's immutable laws] if the course of the disease is not interrupted or disturbed by the patient.'"[39]

According to Foucault, vision is not inherently unbiased, but rather is influenced by theory to such an extent that, as the gaze, it can dehumanize. The gaze presents people as unidimensional bearers of disease, as in Foucault's critique, or, by extension to post-Katrina New Orleans, simply as storm victims to be pitied, or worse. If vision entailed no more than the gaze (a position I reject), then visits to New Orleans would be morally repugnant because they would be participating in the dehumanizing nature of the gaze.

Later theorists elaborate on Foucault's theory of the gaze and in doing so further clarify potential hazards in viewing post-Katrina New Orleans. For example, prominent media critic Laura Mulvey, in her analysis of the "male gaze" as a force for subjugation,[40] argues that Hollywood-style narrative cinema reflects the dominant patriarchal order of U.S. society that subordinates women to men.[41] It does so because of the *castration complex*: the Freudian notion that women, lacking a penis, represent a threat

to men who fear the loss of their own.[42] Against this background, Mulvey speaks of the male gaze that styles the female as passive object and the male as active subject.[43] Women "are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Women displayed as sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle."[44]

Traditionally, mainstream film has been particularly effective at presenting women as objects. Through their gaze, men respond to women in cinema in two ways: first, by identifying themselves with the traditionally dominant male characters; second, by joining them in gazing upon, and thereby objectifying, the film's female characters who, by way of the Freudian castration complex, also threaten male viewers.[45] In response, film presents to the male gaze female characters whom it domesticates and therefore removes as threat, by controlling them, investigating them, "demystifying their mystery," and transforming them into objects of physical beauty.[46] In sum, Mulvey extends Foucault's critique by demonstrating how the male gaze—so pervasive in Western media—dehumanizes, objectifies, and subordinates the viewed. The cultural pervasiveness of film narrative suggests how deeply entrenched this form of vision is in our society, thus delineating how difficult it may be for many to view post-Katrina New Orleans in a less exploitative light.

Academic discussion on the nature of the gaze has also specifically addressed tourism. For example, John Urry, in his treatise *The Tourist Gaze*, emphasizes the effect that the seer has on the seen in claiming that the tourist gaze subjugates those toured upon—the exotic other.[47] He relies on the imagery of *ingestion* by suggesting that the tourist not only objectifies things and people visited, but goes one step further and *consumes* them.[48] The travel story narrates the consumption[49] while the photo records it and "tames the object of the gaze."[50] The tourist gaze does even more; it effects transformation in its objects.[51] Over time, it forces places and people to fashion themselves as different from the mundane that the tourist sees on a

daily basis; there has to be "something distinctive to gaze upon, otherwise a particular experience will not function as a tourist experience."[52] Therefore, all "sorts of places (indeed almost everywhere) have come to construct themselves as objects of the tourist gaze; in other words, not as centres of production or symbols of power but as sites of pleasure."[53] Urry's argument frames tourism as a kind of domination; it forces people and places visited to manipulate themselves into objects to fulfill tourists' desires and for ease of consumption.[54] This would seem to be the height of dehumanization, rendered even more powerful when one considers the tourist gaze as applied to the Gulf Coast in the wake of Katrina. Not only must its inhabitants worry about recovery, but they must also decide how to respond to the dehumanizing gaze of visitors.

In summation, in order to understand the gaze in light of its specific implications for New Orleans, one must start with Foucault's account, which provides a foundation on which scholars in other disciplines have built. Foucault's dehumanizing gaze is seen in terms of the doctor-patient relationship;[55] Mulvey's, by way of the subordination of women in film;[56] and Urry's via the objectification by tourists.[57] Yet each analysis appears more concerned about the impact of vision on that which is seen, and each represents a salutary warning about the potentially dehumanizing character of vision. At their worst, physicians convert the patient into little more than disease's medium; male theatergoers objectify actresses; and tourists consume the sites (and inhabitants) visited. Hence, these scholars emphasize the effect observers have on the observed; those who are gazing benefit most. The physician diagnoses correctly, moviegoers elevate themselves, and tourists nourish themselves with the consumed sights and sounds. Perhaps most importantly, the observers occupy a position of power over the observed. The physician, male moviegoer, and tourist subordinate patient, woman actor, and native.

These critiques of the gaze ring true with reference to New Orleans. Some who have looked on the city during and since Katrina have occupied

positions similar to those of physician, male moviegoer, and tourist. For example, in late spring 2008, political commentator Rush Limbaugh compared that spring's Midwest flooding with what he remembered of Katrina.[58] In a digression suffused with visual rhetoric, he described his view of New Orleans and its citizens, in which they become a foil for Midwestern, and presumably white, superiority:

> I look at Iowa, I look at Illinois; I want to see the murders. I want to see all the looting. I want to see all the stuff that happened in New Orleans. I see devastation in Iowa and Illinois that dwarfs what happened in New Orleans. I see people working together. I see people trying to save their property. I don't see a bunch of people running around waving guns at helicopters. I don't see a bunch of people running and shooting cops. I don't see a bunch of people raping people on the street. I don't see people doing everything they can, whining and moaning, where's FEMA, where's Bush. I see the heartland of America. When I look at Iowa and Illinois, I see the backbone of America.[59]

Limbaugh's vision of New Orleans echoes Foucault's and Mulvey's accounts of the gaze. His view of the city subordinates its residents; it objectifies them by transforming them into gun-slingers, whiners, moaners, rapists, and rape victims. Other sources, such as the Gray Line advertisement noted above, are redolent of Urry's argument and have made post-Katrina New Orleans an object for their customers' consumption.[60] Drive past actual levees that breached, see devastation, be amazed![61] It is no wonder that some would feel uneasy about visiting New Orleans and taking the chance of gazing on decimated places and lives in a way that dehumanizes them and transforms them into objects to be consumed.

The critique that lies at the heart of modern ambivalence about vision is nothing new. It is part of a millennia-long dispute over the relative superiority of the senses. Martin Jay, in *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, identifies an early stage in this dispute as the victory, in Greek philosophy, of vision over rhetoric and

the aural.[62] This elevation of vision in antiquity can also be seen in the words of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, as he follows his Aristotelian forebears: "Now, the sight . . . is the most spiritual, the most perfect, and the most universal of all the senses."[63] The sixteenth century split between Catholic and Protestant can be partially plotted in terms of disagreement about the hierarchy of the senses.[64] Protestant John Calvin emphasized the word in scripture to such an extent that he praised the spiritual value of blindness; it "forced one to listen to the voice of God."[65] Unadorned sixteenth century Calvinist and other Protestant architecture contrasts markedly with the baroque direction that the Catholic Church took in Europe and elsewhere.[66] Hence, vision might be said to have gained the ascendancy in the west through the middle ages, but the rhetorical and aural make a return with the rise of Protestantism. The Catholic-Protestant split represents a divide that endures today in terms of the relative superiority of the senses.[67]

As Jay argues, and as exemplified by Foucault, Mulvey, and Urry, Western civilization has inherited a millennia-long ambivalence about vision that in recent years has been heightened to a critique of this sense as the gaze.[68] This heritage suggests why some feel unease about visiting New Orleans. However, there are other accounts of vision in which it does not affect merely what is seen; it also affects the seer. These accounts contribute to a transformative vision that can inform a spirituality that encourages action in response to visits to post-Katrina New Orleans.

II. Other Perspectives on Vision

Critiques of vision since the Reformation have influenced Western culture and may well lead to a general unease in some about vision, particularly with regard to viewing the results of disaster. The positions of Foucault, Mulvey, and Urry, as I have presented them, sharpen that critique. If there is no more to vision than the domination and objectification of the viewed object, these critiques would seem to make visiting Katrina-affected

areas in New Orleans morally untenable. However, the power differential between vision and object have not always so thoroughly favored the viewer. Indeed, what is viewed can have a transformative effect on the viewer. As noted above, theology represents an important resource for spirituality. This next section reviews several different theological accounts of vision that differ from the above critiques and can inform a morally satisfactory perspective on visiting New Orleans. Perhaps the best resource for the spirituality to be developed here—one that is often overlooked because of its byzantine method of argument and its focus on topics that may seem marginal to a modern audience—is medieval theology, which emphasizes the transformative nature of the object upon those who view it.[69]

A. Resources from Medieval Thought and Practice

Medieval theology—in particular, its account of the beatific vision—would, at first, seem to confirm the claims of the critics referenced above that vision affects only its object. The pinnacle of Christian life is the beatific vision, the vision of God that the blessed, at the end of their earthly life, enjoy for eternity in heaven.[70] Those blessed with the beatific vision were known in the Middle Ages as *comprehensores*, a term that in general described people who grasp something thoroughly, but it came to be used in a technical theological sense for those who grasp God and divine things in heaven.[71] It is to be contrasted with the Latin word *viatores* (from *via*, meaning "way" or "road") which conceives of this life as a pilgrimage or a journey, and so refers to the living here on earth as those "on the way" in this life.[72] *Viatores* have only partial understanding of God in this life.[73] In contrast, the beatific vision of those in heaven is, for medievals, reminiscent of the gaze articulated by the postmodern scholars. It would appear to give *comprehensores* control over God, since it enables them to grasp, possess, or comprehend God. This partial account of medieval theology on vision would, at first glance, seem to confirm the postmodern claim that vision has

its greatest impact on what is viewed, instead of on the viewer. This would appear to disqualify medieval theology as a resource for a spirituality for visitors to post-Katrina New Orleans.

In fact, medieval perspectives on vision are more complex. The impact of the viewer was secondary in importance to the effect of the viewed object on the viewer. It is the primacy of the object in medieval thought and practice that I will develop at some length and recommend as grounds for a more sophisticated spirituality available to tourists in the Gulf Coast region. I turn first to the thirteenth-century scholar Thomas Aquinas, whose voluminous writings on theology and philosophy touched on practically every aspect of the human person, including the sense of sight,[74] and provides a foundation for much of subsequent Catholic theology and spirituality. Fundamental to his theory of vision—derived, as it is, from Aristotelian sources, and contrasted with the emphases of the postmodern critics acknowledged above—is the principle that the viewed affects the viewer: "For vision is made actual only when the thing seen is in a certain way in the seer."[75] Aquinas delineates three different ways that the object affects the viewer, and he does so in terms of three different stages of vision as understood by medieval psychology. The first level is *corporeal vision*, which involves the physical sense of sight; what we actually see is imprinted on our mind by a complex interaction between the brain and the eyes.[76] The second level, *imaginary vision*, involves mentally reviewing images stored or impressed in the memory.[77] At the third level of *intellectual vision*, people view and work with ideas, or the essences of objects, that are impressed in the intellect.[78] Thus, it is not the case that the viewer simply controls the viewed; rather, in the act of viewing, the object also affects the viewer at every level. Qualities, memories, and thoughts of the object impress themselves upon and transform the viewer.

Aquinas's discussion of how humans in different states can view God supplies an example of the effect of the viewed upon the viewer.[79] For Aquinas, even *viatores* can see God in the beauty of His creation.[80] This is

a very mediated vision; it is only through and by means of other things that this vision can access God. In our state here on earth, on our own, humans are incapable of direct access to God.[81] This does not detract from God, who is utterly seeable. God is like the sun that can be seen clearly, just not with our eyes.[82] At the opposite end of the spectrum are the blessed in heaven, the *comprehensores*, who see God as God is, but they can do so only because they have first been given the ability to do what they could not do on their own, with their own eyes.[83] They can see because their intellects have been raised up by God to do so and are "made *deiform*—that is, like to God."[84] Thus, medieval accounts of vision do acknowledge the ability of a viewer to affect the viewed (as postmodern critics emphasize), but this can only occur *after* the viewer has been transformed by the viewed. Humans have the capacity to be spiritually changed by what they see, a fact that will have important implications for a spirituality for visitors to post-Katrina New Orleans.[85]

Vision was not simply a topic of abstract scholastic reflection—it also figured in the visionary practices of medieval women and men. Indeed, the extraordinary visions of the thirteenth-century beguine Hadewijch of Brabant augment the claim that viewed affects viewer.[86] Hadewijch always explicates the circumstances under which her visions occur, and so she contextualizes her seventh vision in terms of liturgy. It begins with her anticipation of viewing the Eucharist—bread and wine changed for believers into the body and blood of Christ.[87] This vision also employs the imagery of sexual union redolent of the erotic poetry of the Old Testament's *Song of Songs* to convey her goal of union with God through Jesus.[88] She anticipates her vision physically, and her desire to consume the Eucharistic elements of bread and wine shade into physical desire:

> My heart and my veins and all my limbs trembled and quivered with eager desire . . . . I desired to have full fruition of my Beloved, and to understand and taste Him to the full. I desired that his Humanity should to the fullest extent be one in fruition with my humanity . . . . For that is the most perfect satisfaction: To grow up in order to be God with God.[89]

The vision turns explicitly Eucharistic with its mention of altar, body, and chalice; it then becomes sexual. What she sees affects her dramatically:

> Then he came from the altar . . . . He turned toward me, in his right hand took from the ciborium his Body, and in his left hand took a chalice . . . . Then he gave himself to me in the shape of the Sacrament (i.e. as Eucharistic bread and wine), in its outward form, as the custom is; and then he gave me to drink from the chalice. . . . After that he came himself to me, took me entirely in his arms, and pressed me to him . . . . Then it was to me as if we were one without difference.[90]

The anticipation of vision affects Hadewijch intellectually. She desires to understand.[91] It also influences her physically. She "trembled and quivered."[92] In her vision, she is united to her "Beloved" eucharistically by consuming the body and blood; they then unite physically to become "one without difference."[93] In sum, Hadewijch's sight does not affect the object of her vision. Instead, what she sees transforms her physically, intellectually, spiritually, and emotionally. That Hadewijch's visual encounter makes her like unto God[94]—deiform in Aquinas's language[95]—supports the potential for transformation of visitors who view New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina.

So far I have cited examples from medieval elites—encounters with God as experienced by a theologian and a mystic—but not all medieval visionary practice involved elite and solitary encounters. Indeed, the most prevalent medieval practice—the viewing of elevated Eucharistic elements, such as consecrated bread and wine, by the laity—was social.[96]

Consumption of the Eucharist in the Middle Ages was relatively rare, but because of the importance of vision and its effects on viewers and because of increasing focus on the Eucharist and the real presence of Christ in it, simply glimpsing the consecrated elements became transformative.[97] Several liturgical innovations ensued. Priests began to elevate the elements after the consecration of each, so that the lay congregation, distant from the altar, could catch a glimpse of it.[98] Candles were lit and bells rung in order to alert the congregation to the elevation and to enhance its visibility.[99] Like Hadewijch's mystical vision, these visual practices—widespread among medieval Christian laity—entailed their transformation, but unlike Hadewijch's, they were communal, not solitary, encounters.[100]

For the medieval theologian, mystic, and lay faithful, vision itself affected viewers, whether alone or communally. The visual served a rhetorical or persuasive function in addition to its transformative function.[101] Thirteenth-century theologian Albert the Great recognized this in his statement that "exposition of the good provokes to the good."[102] This provides an alternative theory to the postmodern scholars' critique of vision that emphasizes the dominance of the viewer over the viewed, and it suggests that transformative vision can bring about social change rather than merely reinforcing a dominant/submissive relationship between the viewer and the viewed.

B. Contemporary Resources for Spirituality

The work of some contemporary scholars agrees with medieval accounts of vision and suggests that vision has the potential to produce social change. For example, Susan Sontag, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, contends that photographic images elicit a range of responses, many of which are context dependent.[103] Photographs of great suffering can simply be spectacles that turn people and objects into things to be possessed.[104] Photographs in museums can be "stations along an often accompanied stroll. Museum visits are usually social and distracted."[105] Yet photographs can also be "an

invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn."[106] They can function rhetorically; they can command, "Stop this."[107] She states that "within a meditative or sacred space or as part of a narrative, a photo can be a *memento mori*, a reminder of death that can haunt or even move to action," attesting to the transformative function of the viewed object that would best serve as a new spirituality for visitors to post-Katrina New Orleans.[108]

Another contemporary figure whose insights can contribute to a spirituality for visitors to New Orleans is Emmanuel Levinas, French thinker and Jewish prisoner-of-war known for his "ethics of the other." Levinas draws out the ethical implications of the face-to-face encounter with other people.[109] He sees it as transformative because the face of another person manifests infinity, which the viewer cannot objectify.[110] As Levinas states, the other always "exceeds *my idea* of the other."[111] Since the face of the other is more than mere physical features but exceeds what is visible, "[t]he face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me."[112] He views the transformative potential in face-to-face encounters via conversation: "It is in conversation that the other as surpassing my assumptions and expectations emerges, that I realize that the infinite appears in the finite."[113]

While Levinas exposes the difficulty of vision in his book, *Totality and Infinity*, elsewhere he relies on the language of vision to point out the danger of dehumanization. He states that "violence consists in . . . ignoring the face of a being, avoiding the gaze, and catching sight of an angle whereby the *no* inscribed on a face by the very fact that it is a face becomes a hostile or submissive force."[114] This difficult sentence contains in germ the most basic concern of his ethics, a concern that responds to his own experience in a German prisoner-of-war camp and to the murder of members of his family at the hands of the Nazis. Because it conveys infinity, the face of the other simply says no to murder.[115] The other

> opposes to me . . . the infinity of transcendence. This infinity, stronger than murder, already resists us in his face, is his face, is the primordial *expression*, is the first word: 'you shall not commit murder.' The infinite paralyses power by its infinite resistance to murder, which, firm and insurmountable, gleams in the face of the Other, in the total nudity of his defenseless eyes, in the nudity of the absolute openness of the Transcendent.[116]

This initial "no to murder" in the face of the other has transformative potential. Like the Eucharist and like photographs, the face can serve as catalyst for social action and demand accountability. Levinas states that "the face is the fact that a being affects us not in the indicative, but in the imperative."[117] It insists on entering into conversation and therefore demands a response.[118] "What is ordered is responsibility for the other . . . goodness wresting the *I* from its irresistible return to self."[119]

In sum, the encounter with the other has the potential to transform; indeed, it is that by which transformation occurs. For Levinas, vision is more ambiguous. It can fall prey to the belief that what is seen is all there is; yet he also speaks of needing to see the face of the other.[120] From this perspective, travel to New Orleans enables one to encounter the physical results of the storm and its human victims in a way that is transformative and demands change.

The potential for transformative viewing exists even in the medical gaze that was so heavily critiqued by Foucault. For example, physician and anthropologist Paul Farmer, who has been recognized internationally for his work in Haiti, as well as his innovations in AIDS and tuberculosis treatment, emphasizes a medical *gestalt* that addresses the needs of the whole patient, rather than just the disease.[121] Thus, after a seven-hour, one-way hike through Haiti's central plateau to see two families with tuberculosis, Farmer says, "'I'm glad we came, because now we know how grim it is and we can intervene aggressively.'"[122] The narrator continues,

> I know what this means: a new home with a concrete floor and metal roof, further arrangements for improving the family's nutrition, school tuition for the kids. Here's a good deed in progress and the perfect example of the Farmer method. First, you perform what he calls "the distal intervention" and cure the family of TB. Then you start changing the conditions that made them especially vulnerable to TB in the first place. . . . In public health projects in difficult locales, theory often outruns practice. Individual patients get forgotten, and what seems like a small problem gets ignored, until it grows large, like [multiply drug resistant TB]. "If you focus on individual patients, . . . you can't get sloppy."[123]

Farmer is almost universally admired as "an influential anthropologist, medical diplomat, public health administrator, [and] epidemiologist," but he is also often criticized for the inefficient allocation of resources on efforts such as the long hikes to see few patients.[124] Yet he attributes his success precisely to this—his holistic approach that extends beyond concern about a particular disease.[125] Farmer has been transformed by these face-to-face encounters with patients, and, as a result, he has influenced international public health practices.[126] To paraphrase Farmer, visitors to New Orleans can be glad they have come because now they know the difficulties that continue to exist and can respond accordingly.

III. Conclusion: A Spirituality for Visitors to New Orleans

As noted above, theology serves as a resource for spirituality; that is, intellectual reflection on faith (theology) contributes to the elaboration of faith's implications for life (spirituality). A fundamental tenet of Christian faith is that it seeks the flourishing of life and not its diminishment.[127] The first half of this article explores contemporary thinkers for whom vision, functioning as the gaze, implies domination of things seen by the one seeing. More specifically, they hold that vision can dehumanize, subordinate, domesticate, and even consume people. Vision in these cases contributes to the diminishment of life. From these perspectives, visiting

New Orleans and viewing its storm-damaged sections would be antithetical to spirituality.

I have attempted to counter the postmodern critiques set forth in the first half of this article with a review in its second half of medieval theology and related visionary and liturgical practices. These represent a clear rejection of a monolithic account of vision as the gaze that dehumanizes. What is seen can transform the viewer intellectually, physically, and emotionally; inspiring one to act on the implications of that transformation. As Sontag asserts, vision can command and move to action on behalf of the flourishing of human life.[128] Implicitly, she is restating the view of the medieval theologians for modern times, and her words help clear the way for vision-as-catalyst, bringing about action within a transformative spirituality for visitors to New Orleans.

The permanence of the transformation is one thing that separates vision by way of news media from the more personal encounters that visiting entails. As noted above, vision did initially trigger action in response to Katrina. Television images "help[ed] the rest of us to begin to see again. For the moment, at least, Americans are ready to fix their restless gaze on enduring problems of poverty, race, and class that have escaped their attention."[129] Vision prompted a response not only to once hidden problems in New Orleans, but also to similar and largely hidden ones elsewhere in the country. Yet the failure to visit and avail oneself of the opportunity to see—as with Mr. Limbaugh and, initially, President Bush—precludes the kind of face-to-face encounter that Levinas speaks of and can lead to misunderstanding and forgetfulness. It rules out the possibility of a transforming encounter that the other can provide, of the kind that President Johnson experienced when he deplaned from Air Force One soon after Betsy's landfall, got his feet wet, and met storm victims.[130] As a result, he could offer both a more immediate and a long-term response. In addition, the photograph recording him surrounded by advisors on Air Force One

suggests that his visit was communal in nature. In Levinasian terms, he was transformed by the conversation and encounters that result in action.

Unfortunately, three and a half years after Katrina, it is easier than ever to forget. The city looks better in many respects than it did before.[131] Private citizens and institutions in wealthier sections have drawn on insurance proceeds to repair and repaint.[132] Tourists in the French Quarter and the uptown section along St. Charles Avenue and Magazine Street—both relatively near the river and on higher ground—can find themselves on what locals call "the sliver by the river" or "the isle of denial," oblivious to the continuing impact of Katrina elsewhere.[133] This inattentiveness is not unique to tourists. It afflicts many residents of Orleans and Jefferson Parishes, the main civil parishes that comprise the metropolitan New Orleans area, who can live their lives separate from and unaffected by the people and places that have suffered such catastrophic flooding and have not had the means to respond to it.[134]

If it is now easier to forget about Katrina, then perhaps it is all the more important for both residents and guests to visit storm-damaged parts of the city to be reminded of them and convinced of the need for ongoing response. The definition for spirituality I have articulated above—faith seeking embodiment—suggests that spirituality involves living out one's faith with one's whole body, including vision. Attentiveness to the physical sense of vision and to its spiritually transformative potential can hardly fail to move people. Perhaps this is the best way to counteract forgetfulness and elicit action that can result in enduring social change.

In my own visits to New Orleans during the immediate aftermath of Katrina, I was struck not only by the sights, but by the smells. Outdoors was the general stench of decay. Indoors, decomposition became more intimate in moldy walls, rotting furniture, and food putrefying in refrigerators long without electricity.[135] To see and to sense such destruction, to meet people and pets affected by Katrina, the living and the dead, these visions affected me and persuaded me in ways similar to those

articulated by Levinas and Farmer. Even three and a half years later, suffering, though not as dramatic, still persists, and need still remains. People remain homeless, houses remain vacant, infrastructure remains unrepaired, and once lively neighborhoods remain widely fragmented. To my acquaintances, mentioned at the outset of this article, who have hesitated to visit New Orleans for fear of becoming voyeurs, you can contribute in many ways. Yes—do donate, do visit, if only as tourists. But when you visit, prepare to be transformed to embody a response that will lead to the flourishing of life here. Seeing the city can have that effect on you. It may even convince you to stay.

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[1] Director of the Loyola Institute for Ministry and Professor of Theology and Ministry, Loyola University New Orleans. I would like to thank Mark Markuly for his idea to address the impact of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans in this issue of the *Seattle Journal for Social Justice*. I am also grateful to the editors of the *Journal* for their patient assistance in helping me to prepare this article, essentially a theology article, for a law school publication.

[2] Todd Shallat, *In the Wake of Hurricane Betsy*, *in* TRANSFORMING NEW ORLEANS AND ITS ENVIRONS: CENTURIES OF CHANGE 122 (Craig E. Colten ed., 2000).

[3] Lyndon Baines Johnson Library and Museum, Research and Archives, http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/AV.hom/hurricane_disaster.shtm (last visited Nov. 6, 2008) (providing access to this image and to a transcript of President Johnson's remarks upon arrival at New Orleans Municipal Airport) [hereinafter Johnson image].

[4] *Id.*

[5] Brian Williams, Op-Ed., *L.B.J.'s Political Hurricane*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 24, 2005, at A15.

[6] *Id.*

[7] *See* Shallat, *supra* note 2, at 134.

[8] DOUGLAS BRINKLEY, THE GREAT DELUGE: HURRICANE KATRINA, NEW ORLEANS, AND THE MISSISSIPPI GULF COAST xiii (2006).

[9] *Id.* at 406.

[10] *Id.*

[11] Paul Morse, President George W. Bush Looks Out Over the Devastation in New Orleans from Hurricane Katrina as He Heads Back to Washington D.C. Wednesday, Aug. 31, 2005, Aboard Air Force One (Aug. 31, 2005) *available at* http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/08/images/20050831_p083105pm0117jas-515h.html [hereinafter Bush image]; quote from Howard Fineman, *A Storm-Tossed Boss*, NEWSWEEK, Sept. 19, 2005, at 38.

[12] Press Release, The White House, President George W. Bush, President Remarks on Hurricane Recovery Efforts, (Sept. 2, 2005), *available at* http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/09/20050902-8.html.

[13] A SCHOLASTIC MISCELLANY: ANSELM TO OCKHAM 49 (Eugene R. Fairweather, ed. & trans., 1956).

[14] *See generally* LAWRENCE S. CUNNINGHAM & KEITH J. EGAN, CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY: THEMES FROM THE TRADITION (1996).

[15] *See id*. at 22–28 (providing brief excerpts from twenty-three different accounts of Christian spirituality).

[16] Although Katrina affected all New Orleans residents, it had a greater impact on African Americans, the poor, and the elderly. *See* THOMAS GABE ET AL., CONG. RESEARCH SERV., HURRICANE KATRINA: SOCIAL-DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF IMPACTED AREAS 13–23 (2005), *available at* http://gnocdc.s3.amazonaws.com/reports/crsrept.pdf.

[17] Stephanie Strom, *Charitable Giving Outpaces That from Other Disasters*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 13, 2005, at A24. Catholic Charities New Orleans alone has brought in thousands of volunteers since late summer 2005. Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New Orleans, http://www.catholiccharities-no.org/programs.htm (last visited Oct. 10, 2008).

[18] Gray Line Tours, New Orleans, Hurricane Katrina Tour: "America's Worst Catastrophe", http://www.graylineneworleans.com/katrina.shtml (last visited Nov. 8, 2008).

[19] *Id.*

[20] "Misery tourism" captures the ambiguity of outsiders viewing Katrina's destruction; it can be transformative, but it can also be pure voyeurism. Chris Rose, '*I AM TRAUMATICALIZED': Dr. John Coins a Phrase While Taking 'The Misery Tour,'* TIMES-PICAYUNE, Dec. 16, 2005, at 2, *available at* http://www.nola.com/rose/t-p/index.ssf?/rose/katrina/i_am_traumaticalized.html.

[21] MARTIN JAY, DOWNCAST EYES: THE DENIGRATION OF VISION IN TWENTIETH CENTURY FRENCH THOUGHT 26 (1993) (providing an account on vision in western culture).

[22] *See* BROOKINGS INST. METRO. POLICY PROGRAM & GREATER NEW ORLEANS COMMUNITY DATA CENTER, THE NEW ORLEANS INDEX: TRACKING THE RECOVERY OF NEW ORLEANS AND THE METRO AREA 56 (2008), *available at* http://gnocdc.s3.amazonaws.com/NOLAIndex/NewOrleansIndexAug08.pdf (showing that in terms of employment, "leisure and hospitality" is the largest single-industry sector in New Orleans before Katrina as after; local, state, and federal government employment combined was significantly larger before Katrina and only slightly larger afterwards). Incidentally, other words for "tourist" tie this category of traveler to vision. This is most clearly the case with "sightseer," but it is no less so with "visitor," which stems from the Latin *videre*, to see. THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY (2d ed. 1989).

[23] *See* MICHEL FOUCAULT, THE BIRTH OF THE CLINIC (A.M. Sheridan Smith trans., Vintage Books 1994) (1973); Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, *in* FILM THEORY AND CRITICISM 394–404 (Meenakshi Gigi Durham & Douglas M. Kellner, eds., 2001); JOHN URRY, THE TOURIST GAZE (2d ed., 2002).

[24] FOUCAULT, *supra* note 23, at ix–xix.

[25] *Id.* at 4.
[26] *Id.* at 89.
[27] *Id.* at 165.
[28] *Id.* at 195.
[29] *See id.* at 155.
[30] *Id.* at 107.
[31] *See generally* FOUCAULT, *supra* note 23.
[32] *Id.*
[33] *Id.*
[34] *Id.* at 196.
[35] *Id.* at 7.
[36] *Id.* at 118.
[37] *Id.* at 8.
[38] *Id.* at 14.
[39] *Id*.
[40] Mulvey, *supra* note 23.
[41] *Id.* at 395.
[42] *Id.* at 399.
[43] *Id.* at 397.
[44] *Id.*
[45] *Id.* at 399–400.
[46] *Id*.
[47] *See generally* URRY, *supra* note 23.
[48] *Id.* at 13, 141.
[49] JOHN STEINBECK, TRAVELS WITH CHARLEY 161 (Penguin Books 1980) (1961) ("One goes, not so much to see but to tell afterward.").
[50] URRY, *supra* note 23, at 127.
[51] *See id.* at 115.
[52] *Id.* at 117.
[53] *Id.* at 115.
[54] *Id.* at 13.
[55] *See generally* FOUCAULT, *supra* note 23.
[56] *See generally* Mulvey, *supra* note 23.
[57] *See generally* URRY, *supra* note 23.
[58] Jenny Hurwutz, *Katrina Has Become Disaster Benchmark: N.O. Victims Usually Lose in Comparisons*, TIMES-PICAYUNE, July 13, 2008, at 1.
[59] *Countdown with Keith Olbermann*, (NBC television broadcast June 18, 2008) (quoting Rush Limbaugh, Rush Limbaugh Show), transcript *available at* http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/25264852/; *see also* Brad Johnson, *Limbaugh Compares Midwest Flood To Katrina: 'I Want To See The Murders'*, WONK ROOM, June 19, 2008, http://wonkroom.thinkprogress.org/2008/06/19/limbaugh-katrina-floods/.
[60] Gray Line Tours, *supra* note 18.
[61] *Id*.
[62] *See* JAY, *supra* note 21, at 26.

[63] THOMAS AQUINAS, SUMMA THEOLOGICA I.78.3c (Fathers of the Eng. Dominican Province trans., 1948) (1274), *available at* http://www.newadvent.org/summa/ [hereinafter SUMMA THEOLOGICA].
[64] *See, e.g.*, JAY, *supra* note 21, at 45–46.
[65] *Id.* at 43.
[66] R. KEVIN SEASOLTZ, A SENSE OF THE SACRED: THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CHRISTIAN ARCHITECTURE AND ART 171–174 (2005).
[67] *See* JAY, *supra* note 21, at 46.
[68] *Id.* at 14.
[69] A turn to medieval theology, which remains a fruitful resource for contemporary Catholic thought, also seems appropriate in this context given how Catholic New Orleans continues to be. *See generally* EARL J. HIGGINS, THE JOY OF Y'AT CATHOLICISM (2007).
[70] CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ¶1045 (2nd ed. 1997).
[71] ROY J. DEFERRARI, A LEXICON OF ST. THOMAS AQUINAS 190 (Loreto Publishing 2004) (1948).
[72] SUMMA THEOLOGICA, *supra* note 63, at II-II.174.5.3; pt. III.9.2.
[73] *Id*.
[74] *See generally* SUMMA THEOLOGICA, *supra* note 63. For the range of Aquinas's writings, see JEAN-PIERRE TORELL, SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS: THE PERSON AND HIS WORK 330-359 (Robert Royal, trans., 1996).
[75] SUMMA THEOLOGICA, *supra* note 63, at I.12.2c.
[76] *Id.* at I.12.11; pt. I.93.6.4.
[77] *Id*.
[78] *Id*.
[79] *Id*. at I.12.
[80] *Id*.
[81] *Id*. at I.12.4.
[82] *Id*. at I.12.1c.
[83] *Id*. at I.12.5c
[84] *Id*.
[85] Indeed, for Aquinas all of the senses work like sight. The thing sensed affects the one sensing. In the conclusion, I will return to the significance of all the senses for visiting New Orleans. *See* SUMMA THEOLOGICA, *supra* note 63, at I.78.3.
[86] Hadewijch, *Vision 7, in* THE COMPLETE WORKS (Columba Hart trans., 1980).
[87] *Id*. at 280.
[88] *Id*.
[89] *Id*.
[90] *Id*. at 281.
[91] *Id*. at 280.
[92] *Id*.
[93] *Id*. at 281.
[94] *Id*.
[95] SUMMA THEOLOGICA, *supra* note 63, at I.12.5c.
[96] *See generally* MIRI RUBIN, CORPUS CHRISTI: THE EUCHARIST IN LATE MEDIEVAL CULTURE (1991).

[97] *Id*. at 290.
[98] *See* NATHAN MITCHELL, CULT AND CONTROVERSY: THE WORSHIP OF THE EUCHARIST OUTSIDE OF MASS 176 (1982).
[99] *Id.* at 60–61.
[100] Incidentally, of the two iconic photographs described above (supra notes 3 and 11), the one of President Johnson appears, by virtue of its communal character, to anticipate a more effective initial hurricane response than would be suggested by the solitude of the Bush image. When considered in light of the transformative power of the communal, Eucharistic vision, each image begins to signify the efficacy of the respective administrations' hurricane response.
[101] *See* RUBIN, *supra* note 96, at 289.
[102] *See id.*
[103] SUSAN SONTAG, REGARDING THE PAIN OF OTHERS (Farrar, Straus, & Giroux eds., 2003).
[104] *Id.* at 77, 81.
[105] *Id.* at 121.
[106] *Id.* at 117.
[107] *Id.* at 77, 81.
[108] *Id.* at 89, 91, 119.
[109] Robert Bernasconi, *Emmanuel Levinas, in* ROUTLEDGE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF PHILOSOPHY (E. Craig ed., 1998).
[110] EMMANUEL LEVINAS, TOTALITY AND INFINITY: AN ESSAY ON EXTERIORITY 50–51 (Alfonso Lingis trans., 1969) [hereinafter TOTALITY AND INFINITY].
[111] *Id.* at 50. Emphasis added.
[112] *Id.* at 50–51.
[113] *Id.* at 50–51, 195
[114] Emmanuel Levinas, *Freedom and Command, in* COLLECTED PHILOSOPHICAL PAPERS 19, 15 (Alphonso Lingis, trans., Duquesne Univ. Press 1998) (1986) [hereinafter *Freedom and Command*].
[115] TOTALITY AND INFINITY, *supra* note 110, at 199.
[116] *Id.*
[117] *Freedom and Command, supra* note 114, at 15, 21.
[118] TOTALITY AND INFINITY, *supra* note 110, at 200–01.
[119] EMMANUEL LEVINAS, ALTERITY AND TRANSCENDENCE 35 (Michael B. Smith trans., 1999).
[120] TOTALITY AND INFINITY *supra* note 119.
[121] TRACY KIDDER, MOUNTAINS BEYOND MOUNTAINS 299–301 (2003).
[122] *Id.* at 293.
[123] *Id.* at 293–94.
[124] *Id.* at 294.
[125] *Id.* at 293–94.
[126] *Id.* at 294.
[127] *See, e.g.*, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, *A Consistent Ethic of Life: An American-Catholic Dialogue, in* SELECTED WORKS OF JOSEPH CARDINAL BERNARDIN (Alphonse P. Spilly ed., 2000).

[128] SUSAN SONTAG, *supra* note 103.
[129] Jonathan Alter, *The Other America*, NEWSWEEK, Sept. 19, 2005, at 42.
[130] Williams, *supra* note 5.
[131] GABE ET AL., *supra* note 16.
[132] *Id.* at 17–22.
[133] "Sliver by the river" describes the higher ground near the Mississippi River that did not flood and that contains the wealthier Uptown and French Quarter sections of New Orleans. *See id.*; *see also* City of New Orleans, Building Inspections and FEMA Flood Zones Map, https://secure.cityofno.com/Resources/Portal1/building_insp_floodzone.pdf (last visited Nov. 8, 2008). "Isle of Denial" refers to that same sliver and the perceived tendency of its occupants to be unaware of the difficulties faced in other areas of the city. *See* James Nolan, Editorial, *Farewell to Flesh on the Isle of Denial*, TIMES-PICAYUNE, Feb. 28, 2006, at B5; *see also* Chris Rose, *Goodbye, Daddy; Hello, Dad*, TIMES-PICAYUNE, June 15, 2008, at C1.
[134] *See* Nolan, *supra* note 132; Rose, *supra* note 132.
[135] Gwen Filosa, *At 72, Lois Martin is Camping Out in Her Moldy, Half-Gutted 9th Ward Home—Determined to Rebuild*, TIMES-PICAYUNE, Feb. 19, 2006, at B1.