

# Seeking Egyptian Gold:

a fundamental metaphor for the Christian intellectual  
life in a religiously diverse age

*Paul J. Griffiths*

**T**his essay attempts three tasks. First, it offers some observations on the nature of fundamental metaphors and their relation to the intellectual life. Second, it examines and partly explains one such metaphor, drawn from the Christian past, and argues that this metaphor is peculiarly appropriate as a guide and icon for parts of the intellectual life of individual Christians and Christian institutions as the third millennium begins. Third, it explores in a provisional way what the acceptance and use of this metaphor might mean for Christian intellectual practice with respect to the religiously alien.

## the fundamental metaphor as icon

Every intellectual act presupposes and implies a purpose, a starting-point, and a proper method. Specifying what these are is not a part of most intellectual acts. If you want to read a book, for example, you'll be engaging in an intellectual act; but you'll be slowed to the stopping-point if, before reading, you have to figure out and make explicit what it is to read, what reading is for, and how it is best done. The same is true for acts of analysis, argument, writing, and so on. But the fact that you don't need to specify, or even to be able to specify, the starting-point, purpose, and method of your intellectual acts in order to undertake them doesn't mean that they are free from these elements; this they could only be if, *per impossibile*, they were situated beyond need of defense or justification on the strictly utopian and featureless plain of pure science; or if they were undertaken by someone standing on an unlocated high point impossibly equidistant from all actual places. Neither does it mean that some thought about the starting-point, purpose, and proper method of particular intellectual acts is never desirable or useful. Quite the contrary. In certain situations, most especially those in which it is no longer (or not yet) clear what particular intellectual acts are for, and so also not clear how best to undertake them or from where to begin them, some such thought is essential. Such thought, I suggest, will inevitably appeal to one or more fundamental metaphors.

To descend for a moment from the bracing but thin air of high abstraction, let me say just what kinds of intellectual acts I'm here concerned with. I'm interested in Christian intellectual acts, which is to say intellectual acts undertaken by Christian individuals or institutions who take these acts as essentially related to their identity as Christians. Not just any Christian intellectual acts, though; I'm here concerned only with those that take as their objects religiously alien phenomena: texts, people, artifacts, or ideas. Specifying just what makes a phenomenon or an agent *Christian* isn't an easy thing; it's just about equally difficult to say what makes a phenomenon or an agent *religious*. And it might seem that a full-scale address to both questions is necessary for the purposes of this essay. But fortunately it isn't. It would, no doubt, be nice to have a widely-agreed short list of necessary and sufficient conditions for distinguishing Christian from non-Christian phenomena with as much precision as we can distinguish plants from animals (although, if there are any zoologists here, you'll

*This essay was  
originally presented  
as a lecture for the  
Lilly Fellows  
Annual National  
Conference,  
held at Valparaiso  
University  
in October  
of 1999.*

know that there are genuine classificatory difficulties even on that matter); it would be equally nice if we had such a short list for distinguishing religious from nonreligious things. But we have no such short lists. For the purposes of the argument I'm about to offer, it will suffice for an intellectual act to be understood as a Christian one taking as its object something religiously alien to Christianity those who perform it understand it in that way.

Some examples of such acts. A contemporary Christian theologian reads and comments upon Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakosabhāsyam*, a Buddhist scholastic compendium composed in India in about A.D. 400; a contemporary Christian observes, participates in, and attempts to understand a ritual offering to Tara, a deity beloved by some Tibetan Buddhists; a Jesuit at an American Catholic University teaches a class on Hindu theistic thought. In each case, a Christian engages intellectually with a religiously alien object. This is the kind of intellectual act I mean.

You may object to the terminology, with Terence, that nothing human can be alien to you, and that all Christians ought to think so, and therefore ought not to think of anything (much less anything religious) as alien. But what Terence meant by *alienum* and what I mean by 'alien' aren't the same. I mean only that something is alien to you if it seems to you not explicitly to belong to what you belong to in whatever respect is under discussion. So, Tony Blair is alien to Bill Clinton in respect of citizenship; my Buddhist friends are alien to me in respect of religion; all women save one are spousally alien to me; and many, many things are alien to (not explicitly part of) Christianity.

Now, acts of this kind, acts whereby Christians engage, intellectually, religiously alien things, and do so explicitly as Christians, do stand in some need of clarification. We Christians do, at the moment, need to devote some thought to what we're doing when we do this kind of thing (what it's for, where it starts from, how it should best be done) because there's much evidence of uncertainty about it. We are, that is to say, in a situation in which it's no longer (or not yet) clear what this intellectual act is for, or how and where to begin it. Christian institutions (churches, universities) do not speak with a single voice about it; hence the debates about the significance of Christian identity for what goes on in Christian institutions of higher learning, and about the importance that the study of non-Christian religions should have in such places. Christian individuals are often unclear about it, as well, as is evident in discussions about the nature and relevance of certain kinds of interfaith discussion and worship to the life of the body of Christ and its members, and about the extent to which explicitly Christian assumptions do and should shape such things. These are hot topics just now, and are likely to remain so; most discussion of them, though (even among Christians), takes place in an atmosphere of resolute and ascetical renunciation of explicitly Christian talk, as though such talk would infect beyond hope of cure any conclusions that might be reached. There are also those who lament the passing of explicitly Christian ways of thinking and acting as formative of and central to the intellectual life even of institutions that call themselves Christian; there are others who celebrate this; and there are yet others who doubt whether there is, can be, or ever was such a thing as a Christian intellectual act. (Recent books by Burtchaell, Marsden and Wainwright are good places to see how these debates play out.)

Some light may be shed upon these debates, or so I think, by looking more closely at a fundamental metaphor that shapes and informs one way of approaching the matter, and this is the metaphor of my title, the metaphor of seeking Egyptian gold. Applying this metaphor to our topic, we have the view that when we Christians intellectually engage the religiously alien, what we do is seek Egyptian gold.

I'll say more about how this metaphor has been used in a moment; first, though, some further comment on what a metaphor is and what it might mean to call one 'fundamental.' I'll follow, for the most part, the understanding of metaphor present in the work of the philosopher Donald Davidson. According to Davidson, metaphors cannot be understood because they have no meaning; this is so because only things with meaning can be understood. Instead of being treated as objects to be understood, then, metaphors ought to be approached as linguistic artifacts that intimate, provoke, suggest, and stimulate. When I say *Christian intellectual engagement with the religiously alien is seeking Egyptian gold* I speak metaphorically, which is perfectly compatible with my sentence

meaning just what it says. Specifying the meaning of the sentence by offering a paraphrase of it (perhaps by attempting synonyms for 'Egyptian' and 'gold') would, if successful, produce a sentence that means just what the original sentence means. Suppose I were to say *Christian intellectual engagement with the religiously alien is a searching for the malleable, ductile, yellow element possessed by the inhabitants of the country in North-Eastern Africa whose capital city is Cairo*. Then, leaving aside difficulties (deep though they are) about synonymy, I'd have produced a sentence that means just what the original sentence meant. What both sentences mean is, of course, false; the claim they make does not indicate a state of affairs that obtains. When I read Buddhist texts I'm not seeking (and I don't find) any of the malleable, ductile, yellow element mentioned, and therefore certainly none possessed by any Egyptian. When I understand, conceptually, the propositional content of our sentence, then, I'm dealing with its meaning, which is precisely not to deal with it as a metaphor.

To deal with a sentence as a metaphor, in Davidson's language, is to understand metaphorical speech as the "dreamwork of language" (245). Metaphor is a device that, like such things as dreams, reveries, and soulful gazes into the eyes of the beloved, provides intimations and provokes a shift of the gaze, a deeper noticing. It cannot be paraphrased. Dante, famously, doesn't tell us what the gazes and the kiss exchanged by Francesca and Paolo meant; he notes only that these things interrupted their reading of the Arthurian romance, that they intimated and provoked something different, something more. So also with metaphors: as the gaze of the beloved provokes the kiss, which in turn intimates the embrace, so the metaphor provokes a diversion of the attention from meaning, and intimates a train of thought whose ending is unclear (eschatologically deferred, we might say, if we're feeling theologically frisky); but its ending will almost always have little to do with what the sentence that expresses the metaphor means. The idea, then, that a paraphrase of a metaphor's meaning can be given is just the wrong idea. But this isn't to say that nothing at all can be said about metaphors. Following Davidson again, analysis of metaphor proceeds best by paying attention to the effects particular metaphors have on those who use them, to the patterns of action and thought provoked or intimated by them.

And it is just here that Davidson makes an interesting move in his analysis of metaphor, the key move for my purposes. The effects of any particular metaphor, like those of any particular joke or dream, are, strictly, limitless. It is impossible to give an itemized and finite list of what any particular metaphor intimates or provokes. Davidson says: "[I]n fact there is no limit to what a metaphor calls to our attention, and much of what we are caused to notice is not propositional in character. When we try to say what a metaphor 'means,' we soon realize there is no end to what we want to mention" (263). To think there is a finite number of particular nonmetaphorical claims intimated by a particular metaphor is to fall back into a semantic construal of metaphor; it is, to use explicitly Christian language, to make the gaze into the eyes of the beloved a gaze into the face of an idol rather than the face of an icon, a gaze that freezes upon and exhausts that at which it looks. An icon, like a metaphor, when properly understood and properly used, offers no representation, no image; it is, rather, a visual device for shifting the gaze repeatedly away from all images, all representations, and toward a closer union with that which is not an image and can never be represented. A failure so to understand icons is what motivates iconoclasm; and a failure so to understand metaphors is what motivates the desire, for instance, to purify the language of worship and prayer of metaphorical usage, to remove so-called crude and literalistic references to God's hands, feet, lips, and kisses, to the milk of God's breasts and the sweet smell of God's breath. Iconoclastic and purificatory desires of these sorts are mistaken (and damaging) precisely because they misunderstand what they oppose, seeing idols where there may be icons. (I rely in this very sketchy account on works by Jean-Luc Marion and Pavel Florensky.)

It is the great advantage of Davidson's understanding of metaphor (though not one he'd recognize) that it accords well with, and itself provides an iconic representation of, how Christians should think about icons. But it is important to guard here against a possible misunderstanding of what I'm suggesting about metaphors (and icons, though I'll now regretfully have to leave the latter aside). To

say that there is no limit to what a metaphor may intimate to or provoke in its users is not to say that just anything may be intimated or provoked. What the metaphorical sentence nonmetaphorically means constrains what it may evoke, even though there is no limit to what it may evoke. In similar fashion, there is no limit to the series of natural numbers, but not just anything may enter that series. Sentences, for example, may not.

Attention to a metaphor is, then, if I may be allowed to wax metaphorically poetical for a moment, an action-provoking gaze into the eyes of the beloved. And, further, a metaphor becomes fundamental if, in some sphere of action, it remains a constant presence, a provocation to which the agent returns ever and again, a device that acts as a gently purring engine of intimation, always running, never turned off. I suggest that the metaphor of seeking Egyptian gold may be like this for Christians in their intellectual engagements with the religiously alien, and that if it is, all sorts of deeply interesting (and properly Christian) intellectual activities are intimated, provoked, and suggested. So much, then, for what a fundamental metaphor is.

### seeking Egyptian gold in the Christian past

The past, as novelist L. P. Hartley wrote in *The Go-Between*, is a foreign country in which things are done differently; and yet it's also a recognizable place, and a good one to wander in when beginning to think about anything. It's especially good for Christians to begin there; for us, the knowledge that we are surrounded always by a cloud of witnesses to Christ and the riches of Christ's kingdom means that we would be foolish not to make a serious effort to consult and understand what this cloud of witnesses has had to say about any matter of concern to us. Moreover, the question of how metaphorically to motivate or catalyze intellectual engagement with the religiously alien is not a new one for Christians. Most often in the past it has arisen as a question about whether and how Christians ought to read works of non-Christian philosophy or non-Christian literature—pagan works, as they were usually then called. These questions exercised Christians from the second century onwards, and they are precisely an instance of the question I've raised, in spite of the deep differences in the terms used for the religious other by Christians of that era and those preferred by us—we tend not to call them 'pagans' or 'the heathen'—and they did not have at their disposal the idea, so ordinary to us, that there is a plurality of religions.

This question was pressing for Christians between the first and the fifth centuries because they were very aware of themselves as a beleaguered minority in a powerfully pagan setting. This is also our situation, and in it serious thought about how to use the artifacts of the religiously alien is unavoidable. The similarity between our situation and theirs is another reason why we ought to pay attention to and learn from their response to their version of our question.

This is not to say, of course, that there was a single response on the part of Christians from the period to the question of how (or whether) to read pagan literature. A quick sampling will show that there was a wide range of opinion on the matter.

Tertullian, with a characteristically aggressive tone, has strong words to say in his *De idololatria* [On the Worship of Idols], composed in North Africa toward the end of the second century, against schoolmasters [*ludimagister*], by which he means teachers of literature in general. (x.1) He takes this to be an improper profession for Christians because it is almost inevitably idolatrous, and he gives two reasons for thinking so. First, schools are unavoidably implicated with observance of feasts and rituals belonging to pagan gods: it's usual, he says, for the feasts of Minerva and Saturn, and for the calendrical festivals of the new year and of midwinter to be kept in schools, and these are all instances of idolatry, deeply inappropriate for Christians. Second, and more damaging, the works taught in these schools assume the reality of the pagan gods, and in teaching them the schoolmaster will almost inevitably give at least the appearance of doing the same: "Consider," says Tertullian, "whether the one who catechizes about idols isn't guilty of idolatry" [*quaere an idololatrium committat qui de idolis catechizat*]<sup>1</sup>—expecting the affirmative answer. (x.6) Tertullian does not wish to place a ban upon the study of non-Christian literature by Christians. He acknowledges that such study is a necessary condition for properly Christian learning. But Christians should treat it, he

says, as they would treat a poisoned drink: it may have benefits and attractions (of color and smell), and these may properly be relished and used. But if you swill it down it will kill you. And, says Tertullian, the kind of limited use and delicate sipping proper to poisoned drinks is not possible for professors of literature because they are swilling it around their mouths every day. Even for students it is difficult not to swallow too much of the deadly brew.

Jerome, too, was extremely ambivalent about the pleasure he took in reading the non-Christian classics, both Latin and Greek. In a letter composed at Rome in the early 380s, in which he commends virginity to Eustochium, a Roman lady, he compares reading non-Christian works (specifically, Virgil and Cicero) to eating meat sacrificed to idols or drinking wine consecrated to demons. (*Epistula*, 22.29). He describes to her in very vivid terms his own earlier addiction to the pleasures of reading Cicero and Plautus. The elegant style of these Latin writers, he says, made it difficult for him to take pleasure in the (comparatively) rude and repellent style of the prophets (22.30). Eventually, while sick of a wasting fever, produced as he thinks by this addiction to mellifluous Latin prose, he has a dream-vision in which he comes before God's judgement-seat and is asked who he is. He replies that he is a Christian, but God contradicts him and says that he is in fact a follower of Cicero, for his heart lies with the treasures of Cicero rather than those of Christ. Jerome thereupon takes an oath that he will never again possess or read worldly books, and that if he does so this will amount to a denial of God [*domine, si umquam habvero codices saeculares, si legero, te negavi*] (22.30).

This seems unambiguously negative and somewhat lacking in nuance: non-Christian books, whether literary, religious, or philosophical, are nothing but a snare and a temptation. Reading them brings no benefits and many dangers; it should therefore be avoided. Jerome's criticism of worldly learning comes in the context of a letter recommending virginity: for him, the physical adornments beloved by the sexually active and the intellectual adornments precious to the professionally thoughtful are of the same sort and have the same end, which is promiscuity.

But this unremittingly negative view of the benefits to Christians of reading non-Christian literature is not the only one defended in Jerome's letters. Later in his career he responds to a criticism that he is himself too free with his quotations from and use of non-Christian literature and philosophy by listing and analyzing all the instances of the uses of non-Christian literature in Scripture, from Solomon's use of philosophy in his compilation of the Book of Proverbs to Paul's use of a quotation from Aratus in Athens and his citation of a proverb from Epimenides to Titus. (70.1-2) What's good enough for Scripture, he says, is good enough for me: there are proper uses of non-Christian literature. He then uses the Deuteronomic regulations about marriage with women captured in war to explain how these proper uses should be understood. These regulations permit such marriage, but only after the woman's head has been shaved and her nails cut and she has spent a full month living in mourning in an Israelite's house (70.2 re Deut. 21:10-14). Likewise with non-Christian books: they may be read and used, but only for Christian purposes, and only after their former identity has been stripped from them by placing them in a new context. And, of course, Christians should read them not for their aesthetic and stylistic delights (represented by the captured woman's hair and nails), but for their capacity to bear fruit in a Christian context (represented by the Jewish children that the captured woman might bear to her captor). Jerome goes on to say that in fact most of the books of non-Christian philosophers are "extremely full of erudition and philosophy" [*eruditionis doctrinaeque plenissimi sunt*] (70.6), which strongly implies that there are benefits to be had from reading them that Christians should want.

Jerome and Tertullian both exhibit the deep difficulties which Christians in the Latin West during the early centuries experienced in thinking about why and how non-Christian works should be read. But other, more optimistic views are also voiced. Basil the Great, writing a letter of advice to his nephews in about 370, discusses the profitable use of Greek (meaning, again, pagan) literature in some detail. For him, while pagan learning is always firmly subordinated to scriptural learning, it is, nonetheless, of very great value. Pagan works, he says, are like the leaves on a fruit tree: they are there to protect the fruit (which is the virtue provoked by scriptural learning), and so

are both ancillary and essential. Pagan writers often praise virtue, and when they do, Christians can be prepared by attending to such praise for the deeper praises to be found in Scripture. For Basil, the *skopos* or final aim of the Christian life is what all pagan learning serves, and this is fully realisable only by those who study Scripture; but a great store of wisdom suitable as a preparation for such study can be had by reading pagan works.

Running like a thread through these discussions is attention to the fundamental metaphor of seeking Egyptian gold. We will understand more deeply this metaphor by looking at its use by Origen and Augustine.

In about the year 235, Origen wrote a letter from Cappadocia to his erstwhile pupil Gregory (later to be called Thaumaturgus and to become bishop of Caesarea), who was then probably in Egypt. The letter treats the proper uses of pagan, or philosophical, learning, something of which Origen had a great deal, and which he used self-consciously throughout his theological writing. Origen encourages Gregory to direct the whole force of his intelligence to the study and promulgation of Christianity (and most especially of the Bible), and to deploy whatever there is in Greek philosophy of use for that end. Philosophy, he says, ought to be understood as ancillary to (the handmaiden of) Christianity, of service principally for the end of understanding and interpreting Scripture better.

In explaining what this might mean Origen turns at once to Scripture (as, given his own assumptions about how to do intellectual work as a Christian, he ought), and specifically to those parts of the Book of Exodus in which the Israelites, still in slavery in Egypt, are instructed by God (through Moses) to beg from the Egyptians objects of silver and gold, together with clothing, before they depart. By this time the Egyptians are desperate to see the Israelites go, and press upon them what they ask for. Later, after leaving Egypt, God instructs Moses to collect from the Israelites gold, silver, bronze, and cloths and yarns of various sorts. These materials are then used to make and ornament the ark of the covenant, the mercy-seat or propitiatory, the priestly vestments, and so forth. But this is not the only use to which the Egyptian treasures are put: a similar request to the people for materials (in this case gold only) is made by Aaron, and from what he gathers the golden calf is made. (Origen refers to Ex. 3:22; 11:2; 12:35-36; 25:1-7; 32:1-4; 35:4-9; 35:20-29.)

This might not seem to be the biblical story with the most immediate promise for explaining whether and how Christians ought read non-Christian philosophical works. But Origen uses it to dramatic effect, focussing his interpretation on the phrase “despoiling the Egyptians” which is used in Exodus to summarise what happens when the Israelites leave Egypt laden with treasure. This treasure, says Origen, is indeed treasure, but it is treasure whose proper use was not known to the Egyptians; only the Israelites, guided by God’s wisdom, could know that the Egyptian gold should be used to make objects devoted to the worship of YHWH. But Origen goes on to say that Egyptian gold is a dangerous thing: it can be used to ornament the worship of YHWH, but it can also be used to create idols. Spending time in Egypt is dangerous, and is more likely to lead to idolatry than to a proper augmentation and ornamentation of YHWH’s worship, and Origen, though with a little confusion of the account of Hadad the Edomite, tells the story of Jeroboam’s use of Egyptian gold to illustrate this.

For Origen, then, Egyptian gold stands for philosophical learning (which he usually calls Greek learning). Sometimes such learning can be a useful handmaiden to Christian intellectual enterprises. But all too often, he thinks, it is not. He says that there are those

who, from their Greek studies, produce heretical notions [*hairesika noêmata*], and set them up, like the golden calf, in Bethel, which signifies Gods house. In these words also there seems to me an indication that they have set up their own imaginations [*ta idia anaplasmata*] in the Scriptures where the word of God dwells. (Pros. Gregorian, col. 89)

Reading non-Christian works, whether philosophical or religious, is, on this view, likely to lead to the importation of ideas incompatible with the Scriptures, and to the interpretation of the Scriptures through those ideas. (Some would say that Origen himself was guilty of just such a mistake.) But this is not an inevitable result; Origen’s letter ends with a passionate recommendation to Gre-

gory that he apply himself diligently to the study and proper interpretation of the Scriptures, but Origen does not take back his opening instruction that Gregory should “extract from the philosophy of the Greeks what may serve as a course of study or preparation for Christianity” (col. 86). Egyptian gold is dangerous treasure, but it is still treasure, still of use for developing a proper understanding of what it is that the Scriptures witness to. It should therefore be sought and applied with wary eagerness.

It seems, from Origen’s use of the metaphor of Egyptian gold, that pagan philosophy—and, by extension, non-Christian religious wisdom—is something that Christians lack and need. Without it, the ark of the covenant cannot be adequately ornamented; with it, God’s commands can be followed and his intentions realized. But Egyptian gold is something the proper use of which is unknown to the Egyptians. In order to be used as God wishes, it must be taken from the Egyptians and used in a new (and perhaps unrecognizably different) context. Imagine a young child fascinated by the beauty of a gold coin and happy to play with it for hours, but completely without understanding of the fact that it can be used to buy clothes to warm his nakedness, or food to nourish a starving man, or incense for the worship of God. An adult who takes the coin from him to use it for one or another of these purposes is perhaps doing what Origen recommends to Christians: taking something needed, something beautiful and good and true, from someone who cannot understand its proper meaning and purpose, and then putting it to proper use.

Origen’s method is instructive. A question is raised: should we read pagan literature, and if we should, with what purpose and using what method? He turns to Scripture to find a fundamental metaphor to set his thought on the question going. Or, we might say, he gazes at the face of the beloved as imperfectly reflected in the iconic words of Scripture, and in the trace of God found there his thoughts are set moving on a particular track. The dreamwork done for Origen by the Egyptian gold metaphor issues, for him, in some particular conclusions, just sketched, in response to the question raised. But these conclusions are not determined by the metaphor. They couldn’t be if I’m right that metaphors don’t have any meaning other than that given by what they explicitly say. For conclusions would only be determined by a metaphor if metaphors were meaning-bearers. Since they aren’t, since they’re more like icons, they suggest or intimate possibilities for thought, and one such possibility is evident in Origen’s letter to Gregory. But it is not the only possibility, as can easily be seen by turning to the use Augustine makes of the same metaphor.

Augustine, writing almost two hundred years later than Origen, also makes use of the metaphor of Egyptian gold for non-Christian wisdom. In his work *De doctrina christiana* (On Christian Doctrine), begun in 396-97 and revised and completed in 426-427, he provides rules for the proper interpretation of Scripture, and for the effective communication of its meaning to others—in effect, a complete program in Christian education whose central focus is Scripture. In one part of this work he discusses whether Christians should study secular disciplines and read non-Christian literary works, and if so, how they should do so. (ii. 27-ii.63) The leitmotif of his discussion is that secular disciplines and non-Christian literary works should be used by Christians just in so far as they help in gaining understanding of Scripture. Christians should not fear these things just because they were developed for non-Christian purposes: After all, he says, it is no reason for us not to learn our letters, just because they say Mercury is their patron god [*quia earum repertorem dicunt esse Mercurium*] (ii.28). Truth may be found outside Scripture and outside the Church, and wherever it is found it belongs to God and should be acknowledged as such by Christians.

It is principally when he comes to consider the value of philosophy for Christians that Augustine takes up the metaphor of Egyptian gold. He begins by acknowledging that philosophers, especially Platonists, have said many true things, and that Christians ought to acknowledge this because on some matters what Platonists teach and what Christian doctrine prescribes are not different (11.60). It is important to notice that this way of putting things strongly suggests that pagan philosophy doesn’t teach any truths unknown to Christians. But Augustine immediately goes on to say that when Christians do find truths taught in Platonist works, they should claim them for their own use, just as the people of Israel appropriated the gold and silver of the Egyptians. But there is a dis-

analogy here: if Christians already teach and know all the truths that Platonists teach, what does it mean to claim them? In the case of the Egyptian gold, the whole point of the story (and the metaphor) is to say that the Egyptians have something the Israelites lack and need, but Augustine's interpretation of the metaphor seems to suggest only that the Egyptians have something good and true that Christians already possess.

There is perhaps an ambiguity in Augustine's thought here. But on balance I think his view is close to Origen's on this particular point. In his fullest statement on the matter he says:

[T]heir [the pagans'] teachings also contain liberal disciplines which are more suited to the service of the truth, as well as a number of most useful ethical principles; also, some true things are to be found [*nonnulla vera inveniuntur*] among them about worshiping only the one God. All this is like their gold and silver, which is not something they instituted themselves but something which they mined, so to say, from the ore of divine providence which has been paid down everywhere [*quasi metallis divinae providentiae, quae ubique infusa est, eruerunt*]. As they for their part make perverse and unjust misuse of it in the service of demons, so Christians for their part ought, when they separate themselves in spirit from their hapless company, to take these things away from them for the proper use of preaching the gospel. Their fine raiment too, meaning, that is, what are indeed their human institutions, but still ones that are suitable for human society [*hominum quidem instituta sed tamen adcommodata humanae societati*], which we cannot do without in this life, are things that it will be lawful to take over and convert to Christian use. (ii.60)

This way of putting things implies, even if it does not quite say, that the "useful ethical principles" and the "institutions suitable for human society which we cannot do without in this life" are needed and not already possessed by Christians. And Augustine immediately follows this paragraph with a dithyramb of praise to those Christian thinkers (Cyprian, Lactantius, Victorinus, Hilary, and including Moses) who have been crammed with but not seduced by "what came out of Egypt." Egyptian gold is therefore not only a good thing for Christians, but also an essential thing.

But Augustine cannot leave matters at that point. Concerned, apparently, that his readers and hearers might think that he has placed too high a value on Egyptian gold, he ends his discussion of the topic by re-emphasizing that all the "knowledge derived from the books of the pagans" [*cuncta scientia ...collecta de libris gentium*], is of minor significance when compared to the knowledge derived from Scripture, and that, using an elegantly aphoristic formula, "whatever one might find outside [the Scriptures] is if harmful condemned there and if useful found there" [*nam quidquid homo extra didicerit, si noxium est, ibi damnatur; si utile est, ibi invenitur*]. (ii.63) Once again the tension is evident: Augustine gives with one hand and takes back at once with the other. He wants to say that the Egyptians have gold lacked and needed by Christians, but as soon as this is said—or at least strongly implied—he takes it back and says that Christians already have all the gold to be found in Egypt.

If this latter position is the correct one, the question of why Christians should interest themselves in Egyptian gold remains unanswered. The only attempt to answer it in *De doctrina christiana* is the suggestion that the Egyptians have stolen what conceptual treasures they have from Christians, and that Christians are interested in them only because they want to get back what is rightfully theirs. Augustine mentions a story that Plato travelled to Egypt at the time of Jeremiah, when that prophet was in exile there, and learned what truths he knew by a study of Jeremiah's work (ii.43); and he also often speaks of claiming back from the Egyptians the truths they teach, as from unjust possessors of stolen property. The Plato/Jeremiah story is, of course, almost certain to be mistaken historically, and it stands uneasily with Augustine's (and Origen's) use of Exodus as the basis for the Egyptian gold metaphor, since there is no suggestion in that book that the gold and silver received by the Israelites had been stolen from them; it is, rather, a proper possession of the Egyptians, given (under some duress) to the Israelites. Augustine himself shows some uneasiness about the theft idea, (for instance in *Retractiones* ii.4) and uses it, I suspect, as a relatively unconsidered polemical response to accusations from Platonists that anything good in Scripture is an ille-



gitimate borrowing from Plato. The theft motif will, in any case, be of no use in considering what Christians might think about the gold of the Buddhists or the Confucians, since no one can reasonably suggest that anything true and good in Buddhism has been stolen from Christian texts.

The thoughts intimated to Origen by the Egyptian gold metaphor are not identical with those intimated to Augustine by the same metaphor. They differ in level of interest in determining how the Egyptians came by the gold in the first place, as well as in what to say about just how Christians should use the gold if they can get their hands on it. This is what we'd expect. If metaphors don't mean but evoke, there'll be considerable variation in what they evoke. But there is also considerable similarity in the direction in which Augustine's and Origen's thoughts are pushed by the metaphor as given in its biblical context. They both assume that there is something precious which Christians must have in order to fulfil their God-given mission, and they are both prepared at least to entertain the possibility that Christians can get it from no other source than the Egyptians. They agree, too, in the thought that Christians should want these precious things, this Egyptian gold, only in order to bring to fruition their own mission. Any other motivation or goal would be destructive, damnable, idolatrous. And so they agree, too, that precious though the gold is, it can be used in at least two ways: to make golden calves, or to ornament the ark of the covenant. There is, for both of them, danger and promise in the gold of the Egyptians, the possibility of learning what God wants to be known as well as the possibility of creating an intellectual idol that shuts God out. They differ, though, in their assessment of the proper relative weights of the danger and the promise. Origen, although he notes the danger, is not much troubled by it (and in this he represents a trajectory of thought developed most fully by the Cappadocians, especially Basil the Great). But Augustine has a deep worry about the perils of overestimating the value of Egyptian gold, a worry that leads to the tensions in his thought that I've noted.

So much for the uses of the Egyptian gold metaphor by the Fathers (though what I've said has no more than scratched the surface of the topic). What, now, might we do with this metaphor as an icon suggestive of ways to engage, intellectually, the religiously alien?

### seeking Egyptian gold today

The early years of the third millennium are not the early years of the first. Much is different, and contemporary Christian practices used to engage the religiously alien intellectually cannot simply reproduce those used for that purpose in the first centuries. But the differences do not go so deep that the metaphor of seeking Egyptian gold has ceased to have the power to function metaphorically or iconically for us. It is not a dead metaphor, even if it is largely a forgotten one.

If it is to be recovered, it must be gazed on with the serious devotion given to an icon. Part of this gazing will involve attention to the uses made of the metaphor by Christians in the past. But turns to the past can't be merely antiquarian if the metaphor is to be iconic for us. This is because antiquarians are interested in idols that can be placed in museums, while Christians are interested always in the intellectual service of the living God. And so the turn to the past is, for us now, an essential part (but only a part) of permitting the metaphor to work on our thought and our practice by intimation and evocation.

What, then, might a contemporary tradition-informed gaze at the metaphor we've been considering intimate to us about our contemporary Christian practices of engaging the religiously alien?

First intimation: the gold of the Egyptians is precious, desirable, to be sought with eagerness. We are therefore motivated to grapple with, to probe, to explore, and to ingest, the particulars of the religiously alien in all their alien specificity, because it is precisely in those specificities that we will find—if we can find—the precious things we seek, even though we don't know as we seek them just what they are or what we'll do with them when we've found them. Christians, both individuals and institutions, might therefore be moved powerfully by the metaphor toward deep engagement with the particularities of the religiously alien. This is not something optional for or ancillary to the intellectual life of contemporary Christians. Meditation upon the biblical roots of the metaphor will reinforce this view. The Israelites, as they left Egypt, were commanded by God to seek Egyptian

gold, even though they did not then know what it was to be used for. It was not enough for them to follow the leadership of Moses into the wilderness under the hand of YHWH. They needed, also, something from the alien.

This first intimation evokes, then, the need for deep engagement with alien specificity. But what might this mean? I can make only some brief suggestions here, without any pretense to exhaustiveness. The first is the possibility and desirability of radical textual engagement with the religiously alien, the possibility and desirability of a deep reading of the works the Egyptians—the Buddhists, the Muslims, the Hindus—have written and spoken. Such a deep textual engagement is hardly practised by Christian individuals or institutions today. This is mostly because we think we know what we'll find in the literary works of the religious alien, and so we find ourselves disinclined to make the effort to look closely. Theological conservatives tend to think that they'll find a tissue of error and idolatry, and so they don't look at particulars. Theological liberals tend to think that they'll find lots of what Christians already know—which is true and good, of course—and so they don't bother to look, either. But Christians motivated by intimations of as-yet-undreamed-of gold to be found among alien works will not think either of these things. Instead, they'll go digging, with serious sweat.

A paradigmatic product of such sweaty exertion, and one noticeable by its absence in the contemporary Christian world, would be the commentary. Christians have always displayed the riches of their deep reading, their properly religious reading, in the literary genre of the commentary, most likely because this genre, more than all others, is the natural product of radical textual engagement. It, more than any other, takes the details of what is read (rhetorical, linguistic, conceptual, theological, analogical, anagogical, and so on) seriously and finds them worthy of explication. Christian history, of course, is filled with Scriptural commentary; it has also, at certain periods, been filled with commentary upon alien works, upon Virgil, for example, or Aristotle; but it has, with rather few exceptions (I think of Nicholas of Cusa's work on the Qu'ran) not offered much in the way of commentary upon the literary gold of the religiously alien. Where are the contemporary Christian commentaries on the massive and fascinating works of Buddhist scholasticism produced in India and Tibet? Where the commentaries upon the Islamic Hadith, or the devotional hymns of the Alvars, or the alchemical works of religious Taoism? Christians have, it seems, neither the intellectual energy or the interest to do the work to produce such artifacts. Constant attention to the guiding metaphor of Egyptian gold might help us to recover both, and to show our recovery in how we teach what is religiously alien in our schools, universities, and seminaries.

The fact that we do not, as Christians, engage in deep reading of this sort is largely because we are captive to the wrong metaphors, metaphors that have no roots in the Christian past, and no properly Christian resonance. How many of us, for instance, are captive still, even if half unknowing, to the Weberian *hochwissenschaftliche* understanding of the vocation of intellectual work as an iron cage that radically separates fact and value, and does so precisely in its attempt to make of theology something that is not properly an intellectual discipline at all? (I'm thinking especially of Weber in "Wissenschaft als Beruf.") This fundamental metaphor is compatible with certain sorts of deep reading (though not with Christian deep reading), and the sad irony is that textual engagements with the works of the religious alien that I have in mind have, in recent centuries, almost always been done in this Weberian mode and as a result have yielded no gold of any use whatever for the ornamentation of the body of Christ. Again, attention of the right sort to the right metaphors will help.

Deep engagement with specificity need not, however, be only textual-commentarial in its mode. It may also be concerned with modes of action, at the institutional or the individual level. Here there are many possibilities, too, but most of these are possibilities not for the university but for the Church. For example, I expect that a deep and respectful exposure to practices used by the religious alien to transmit the faith across generations in a deeply inhospitable cultural setting like that of twenty-first century America would yield gold of an especially bright and decorative sort.

But in addition to this first intimation, the intimation of preciousness and desirability, there is

a second intimation: the gold of the Egyptians is beautiful, and therefore dangerously seductive. This is why the Fathers had (and why we should also have) such a deeply ambivalent attitude to all intellectual enterprises that pretend independence. They are beautiful, and what is beautiful may always lead us to value it for itself and not for its relation to the God of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. The Israelites, recall, used the gold of the Egyptians to make a golden calf before they used it to ornament the ark of the covenant. Bearing this intimation in mind, holding it constantly before us as something evocative, should lead Christians doing the kind of serious work on the religiously alien just outlined, always to bear in mind what they are doing it for. They are doing it—to use a different but equally evocative metaphor—to annotate the sacred page of Scripture, to enrich our understanding of what God has given us and to permit us better to serve and respond to the God who has given it to us. No other goal is, finally, of any interest at all to Christian intellectuals, and that this is so will make what Christians produce when reading the works of the religious alien with the attention they require deeply different from what Weberian intellectuals produce. A Christian commentary upon the Qu'ran or the Lotus Sutra, for instance, will be different in essential respects from one produced by a Weberian intellectual. It will be a work produced out of love for God and as an act of service to the body of Christ, and this will be evident in at least the subtext of every line. Showing in detail what this might mean can't be done today; it must, in fact, await the development of a tradition of doing what hasn't yet been done, which is approaching the gold of the Egyptians, the treasure of the religious alien, simultaneously as something precious that is desperately needed and as something dangerous always to be submitted to and constrained by an authority beyond itself.

It's only in self-conscious submission to the ambivalent metaphor of Egyptian gold, in an attitude of wary receptiveness to the intimations of that icon, that Christians can begin to do the work that needs to be done on the religious alien. And since there's a great deal of work to be done, I hope that more of us will soon adopt just such an attitude.

I'll conclude with a brief consideration of two possible objections to the line taken in this talk. According to the first, thinking in the way I've suggested about the Egyptians is theologically problematic because it calls into question the centrality and all-sufficiency of God's self-revelation in Christ. Hasn't God, it might be argued, already given us all we need to know? How can the Church need to learn about its concerns from those who do not know Christ? Shouldn't Christians be the teachers of religious aliens rather than their students? Such an objection, I think, is misconceived. It is certainly true that God's self-revelation in Christ is complete in the sense that only in Christ was God fully present to humans. The doctrine of the incarnation, coupled with its entailment, which is a properly trinitarian theism, requires us to say this. But saying, for example, what the Nicene Creed says about the Holy Trinity is perfectly compatible with the claim that the Church has not yet completed its theological task. Indeed, the claim that the body of Christ does not yet know all it needs to know about God's relations to and intentions for human beings is, I think, also required of Christians, for reasons that include a properly-developed doctrine of sin and an understanding of the history of salvation. Further, it is obvious from the history of God's dealings with His chosen people, both Christians and Jews, that those chosen and used by God to educate and chastise His chosen ones are often not of them. Consider Cyrus. Acknowledging that the Egyptians may have treasures we need is not only intellectually productive, but also an exercise of the complementary Christian virtues of confidence and humility: confidence that we will, with God's guidance, know better what to do with the gold we find than the Egyptians who already have it, and humility before the fact that God has chosen to use the hands and minds of the religious alien to give us treasures we do not yet have.

A second objection, from the other side, as it were, is that to speak and think of faithful Buddhists, Muslims, and so forth as Egyptians, aliens whose treasures we may plunder, is redolent of an entirely unacceptable imperialism of both an intellectual and (perhaps) a political sort. This is a complex objection because it contains both ethical and practical assumptions; I can't fully address it here. I'll sketch the beginnings of a response by noting two things. First, attention to the intimations

Paul Griffiths  
in the fall of 2000  
will be Schmitt  
Professor of  
Catholic Studies  
at the University  
of Illinois  
at Chicago.

of the metaphor of seeking Egyptian gold suggests that what the religious alien actually says and is really about are deeply important matters; the bland assurance of the anti-imperialist does no such thing, and in this respect, among others, is, in a possibly paradoxical way, much less respectful of the alien's particularity. Second, seeking Egyptian gold is, as a Christian act, to be framed and constrained always by the demands of *caritas*, of Christian love; this acts, or should act, as a constraint upon the arrogance and violence of imperialists. As Bonaventure says, "...*hic est fructus omnium scientiarum, ut in omnibus aedificetur fides, honorificetur Deus.*" And if that honor really is the fruit aimed at by deep reading of the religious alien, worries about imperialism ought not to be very high on the list of our difficulties. †

#### works cited

- Augustine. *De doctrina christiana*.
- Basil. *Saint Basile aux jeunes gens sur la manière de tirer profit des lettres helléniques*. Fernand Boulenger, ed. Paris, 1935.
- Bonaventure. *De reductione artium ad theologiam*, sec 26.
- Burtchaell, James T. *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches*. Grand Rapids, 1998.
- Davidson, Donald. "What Metaphors Mean," in *idem: Inquiries Into Truth and Interpretation*. Oxford, 1984.
- Florensky, Pavel. *Iconostasis*. New York, 1996.
- . *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth*. Princeton, 1996.
- Hartley, L.P. *The Go-Between*. London, 1956, p. 9.
- Jerome. *Epistula*.
- Marion, Jean-Luc. *Dieu sans l'être: Hors-texte*. Paris, 1982 or *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, Chicago, 1991.
- Marsden, George. *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*. New York, 1997.
- Origen. *Pros Grégorion Epistole*. This letter is translated in vol. X of the *Ante-Nicene Christian Library*, ed. Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, Edinburgh, 1869, 388-390).
- Tertullian. *De idolatria*.
- Wainwright, William, ed. *God, Philosophy and Academic Culture*. Atlanta, 1996.
- Weber, Max. "Wissenschaft als Beruf" in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*. Tübingen, 1951; first published 1922.