

*In the Spirit* (John Hunt Publishing, 2021)

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In this book, philosopher Steven DeLay articulates an existence “in the Spirit” through a series of meditations on matters of basic human concern: love, hope, suffering, and death. With attention to the Bible and works of art (including Bellini, Caravaggio, Hopper, Kandinsky, Ossawa Tanner, Pissarro, Rembrandt, and Rodin), it explores the depths of the human experience. A contribution to the spiritualist tradition of edifying works by Fénelon, Kierkegaard, and Chrétien, *In the Spirit* celebrates the glory of being human in light of the Word of God.

## **Chapter One**

### A Drunkard's Sleep

This first chapter explores the connection between drunkenness and sleep, where both in turn are understood as symbols of faithlessness. Drawing on Genesis, Proverbs, the Gospel of Mathew, the Gospel of John, and Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, it shows the sense in which drunkenness signals spiritlessness. Paintings of Bellini, Brouwer, and Ostade serve as illustrations.

## **Chapter Two**

### The Strong Wind and a Still Small Voice

In the first chapter of Romans, Paul says that unbelievers are without excuse (Romans 1:20). Though the Gentiles do not have the Mosaic Law, they have a law written in their hearts. Hence, God has not spoken only to the Israelites through the Torah and the Prophets, but to everyone through the voice of conscience: "For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another" (Romans 2:14-15). Paul's account of conscience raises a number of questions. If God has been revealed to everyone (whether by the Law of Moses or conscience), why do many deny God exists? According to Paul, it is not so much that God is silent as that the unbeliever does not hear. The unbelieving heart is the hardened heart. St. Stephen says so to mockers who murder him for having reminded them of it: "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Ghost: as your fathers did, so do ye" (Acts 7:51). Thus, the question of conscience and revelation falls within the phenomenological problematic of the call and the response. What, in short, can be said about this play between the two? The four modes of revelation recounted in the first Book of Kings provide the key. First, wind: "And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord," next "an earthquake," third "a fire," and finally "a still small voice" (1 Kings 19:11-13). The voice that remains, this chapter concludes, is the same voice of conscience Paul will reference in his letter to the Romans, a voice that reveals God to everyone, even those who do not respond to the other ways that God has been revealed.

## **Chapter Three**

### The Golden Calf

Everyone knows of the golden calf. But what is it? Is it not with us today? One remarkable thing about the Old Testament's account of the golden calf is that it was said to draw a crowd. The crowd gathers against God's words to Moses on Mount Sinai, which forbid idolatry. Far, then, from relating only a singular historical occurrence, the biblical story of the golden calf signifies a perennial temptation, namely the stubborn slippage into idolatry. Today, that same consciousness is seen in the virtual reality of mass media. Due to the advent of social media and the cult of narcissism that it has created, individuals have become their own golden calves—ours is the age

of self-worship. Seeking the constant validation of others, self-idolaters seek a crowd to adulate themselves. In doing so, they think they are their own gods. A look at Poussin, Fragonard, March, de Wit, Caravaggio, and Rosa reinforce how the worship of the golden calf is one of self-adoration.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Through the Veil of the Word Made Flesh**

Just as classical phenomenology understands us as beings who open and dwell within a world, so modern systematic theology sees us as creatures whose salvation is mediated by the practices and sacraments of the visible church. This phenomenology and theology, by relegating the self to the horizon opened in intentionality, neglects the original mode of being-before-God. They marginalize the importance of subjectivity. Neglecting the flesh's mode of phenomenality, such a view misses the way God is first of all revealed to us. Job, for instance, spoke of this interiority: "And though after my skin worms destroy this *body*, yet in my flesh shall I see God" (Job 19:26). It is this same flesh that is mentioned in the Prologue to John: "And the Word was made flesh" (John 1:14). And is this not why, in the immediately preceding verse, we read that the world knew not God? (John 1:10). The chapter will explicate the thesis that, if the world did not recognize the incarnate Word, it is because the flesh in which the Incarnation occurs is itself unworldly. Before any worldly mediation (prior to any liturgical practice or creedal doctrine), and hence before all discursive thought, God is revealed in the depths of subjectivity, the unworldly flesh. Faith unfurls within the depths: "Launch out into the deep, and let down your nets for a draught" (Luke 5:4). And it is in these depths that the Word made flesh opens "a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh" (Hebrews 10:20). This chapter investigates what Michel Henry called the Arch-Revelation of the flesh. Caravaggio's *The Incredulity of St Thomas* and *The Conversion of St Paul* prove crucial.

## **Chapter Five**

### **The Purple Robe**

During the Passion, Christ is mocked by Roman soldiers who "platted a crown of thorns, and put it on his head, and they put on a purple robe, and Said, 'Hail, King of the Jews!' and they smote him a purple robe" (John 19:2-3). This episode, like the other cruel events in which it figures, has suggested to some that Christ was a powerless and pathetic figure. That, for example, is certainly how Nietzsche saw the Crucified One. However, in answer to Pilate's warning ("knowest thou not that I have power to crucify thee, and have power to release thee?"), Christ's reply indicates the presence of a paradoxical power: "Thou couldest have no power at all against me, except it were given thee from above: therefore he that delivered me unto thee has the greater sin" (John 19:11). This chapter challenges the modern habit of equating power with self-assertion, coercion, and intimidation. What, we must ask, does true power involve if Christ, relinquishing any pretension of assertion, exemplifies it? Following Jean-Yves Lacoste's analysis of a kenotic existence, this chapter shows how power consists in the humility of self-emptying. Rembrandt's *Christ Before*

*Pilate and the People*, Pieter Frasz de Grebber's *Christ at the Column*, and Titian's *Ecce Homo* serve as illustrations.

## **Chapter Six** Apparitions of the Kingdom

Matthew is replete with parables that liken the kingdom of heaven to relatable events and familiar happenings—an old maid searching for a lost penny, a mustard seed that grows beyond all expectations, a house built on a foundation of rock, etc. This chapter examines the paradoxical phenomenality they each describe: by revealing the kingdom of God as they do, there is, as Pascal remarked, always sufficient evidence to confirm its presence for those who want to believe, while just enough reason to deny its presence if one wishes to disbelieve. The parables, therefore, emphasize that the kingdom of God manifests itself only to those who want to see it. The idea that desiring the kingdom is a precondition for encountering it is underscored also in John, where we read that the Light shined in the darkness but the darkness comprehended it not (John 1:5). The reputed inability of some to see the kingdom is therefore what, following Merleau-Ponty, we might call a motivated failure to see. Though what is there to be seen lies at the ready, those who do not see fail to see because they do not want to see. This chapter accordingly examines the perceptual law at work, showing how such light is invisible, whereas worldly visibility is a form of darkness. Henry Ossawa Turner's *Christ and His Disciples on the Road to Bethany* and Pissarro's triptych of *Boulevard Montmartre* paintings are exemplary.

## **Chapter Seven** On the Broad Way

One of Christ's most jarring teachings is recorded in the seventh chapter of Matthew. There we are told that life consists in choosing between one of two—and only two—paths. The first Christ calls the broad way, and it is one we are cautioned not to take: "Enter in ye at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat" (Matthew 7:13). The second way is the right one, yet one that few take: "Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Matthew 7:14). That the path of life is narrow, whereas the path of death is wide, is due to the fact that there is one absolute truth: "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no one comes to the Father except by me" (John 14:6). What, however, does it mean to walk the way of life? If all other ways lead to destruction, why do they remain popular when, strictly speaking, they are against anyone's own self-interest interest? Are those who travel it confused, deceived, or simply ignorant? This chapter measures these respective ways in light of the distinction we owe to Jean-Louis Chrétien's work on the call. The broad way, it will be suggested, is a life that takes its own preferences as the law—lawlessness becomes the only absolute. Rodin's *The Three Shades* and *The Thinker at the Gates of Hell* are central to the analysis.

## Chapter Eight

### Paul and the Philosophers

In the Book of Acts, Paul is recorded as being struck by the unchecked idolatry in the streets of Athens: “Now while Paul waited for them at Athens, his spirit was stirred in him, when he saw the city wholly given to idolatry” (Acts 17:16). Paul not only disputed with those in the synagogue; he also took to the streets, contending for the faith in the market. As ancient Athens was a place of great learning, Paul found himself arguing with the philosophers: “Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoicks, encountered And some said, What will this babbler say? him. others some, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection” (Acts 17:18). Stoicism taught, as Paul did too, that carnal desires are empty. Both are agreed that the transcendental egoism of lust is to be avoided. When, then, separates their respective doctrines? In the face of life’s ephemerality and incompleteness, Paul highlights the hope of the Resurrection as what alone can redeem time from despair. It frees us from having to live under the shadow of the grave. Hope in the Resurrection alone lays the basis for a life of genuine meaning and hence free from anxiety and torment. In a secular age where it has become so common to place our hopes for satisfaction in the finite things of time—an education, a career, a family, a comfortable retirement—hope for the Resurrection lends an unparalleled exigency to time. To be truly human, this chapter suggests, is therefore to embrace the desire for meaning—and hence, it is to live for eternal life, not only life in the time that leads to death. Dutch *vanitas*, particularly those of van Steenwyck and van Utrecht, are focal pieces.

## Chapter Nine

### The World

If the truth sets one free, is that not because it transforms the one it does from a slave of sin to a son of righteousness? If each of us is called to overcome the world, does not such overcoming indicate that everyone’s ultimate destiny is decided within, and only within, the transcendental life of the single individual who bears the dizzying anxiety of being free to choose between good and evil? It goes without saying that from the biblical perspective we do not save ourselves (Christ alone does), but we must not reject that salvation if it ever is to be ours. And how is that possible but by bidding our former life adieu? Hence, the New Testament letters commonly exhort those who have been born again to be holy, and not to return to the ways of the world. For the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes open up onto a field of darkness and death: “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever” (1 John 2:15-17); “Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God” (James 4:4). It would be a strange thing if God, desiring to save us from evil, should tolerate those who have reputedly been redeemed from it to continue languishing in it. And yet, this is how modern systematic theology treats the matter, holding as it does that to counsel sanctification as somehow equivalent to Gnosticism or escapism. However, the scriptures are unambiguous that the life of faith is one that involves becoming less and less

conformed to the world: “He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8); “To open their eyes, and to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among them which are sanctified by faith that is in me” (Acts 26:18); “Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:1); “we know that we are of God, and the whole world lieth in wickedness (1 John 5:19); and thus, “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12). This chapter sketches what it means to live an existence no longer of being-in-the-world but instead of not-being-of-the-world.

## **Chapter Ten**

### “Go, and sin no more”: Perfection as Commandment

What does it mean to perfect one’s faith, or to be perfect in that faith? John said it was to avoid sin, for, “Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God” (1 John 3:9). In examining the connection between faith and perfection, this chapter turns to Rembrandt’s *The Woman taken in Adultery*, which depicts the events of chapter eight of John, to illustrate this. It is well known that the Pharisees are convicted of hypocrisy for being with sin as much as the adulteress. But there is more. The fact remains that if they required a weekly sacrifice or the annual Passover as a sin offering, it is only because the sin never ceased. It is this cycle of sin from which the woman taken in adultery, however, is freed. Sin is thus not an inevitable consequence of a fallen nature; it is a flawed way of living from which Christ has come to transform us.