

In the autumn shadows: God comes to us

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [October 21, 2008](#) issue

Autumn arrives September 22 (in the Northern Hemisphere). If you are like me, you depart reluctantly from summer, the season of light. Fall carries intimations of death—leaves dry and shrivel, grass bleaches corpse-pale, insects perish, squirrels batten down their nests and fatten up for a long season of lethargy. If spring is the season of fecundity and new life, summer is the season when that life is at its blazing, buzzing zenith. And fall is the season of diminishment, of paring down and drawing back, of recognizing the mortality of all living things.

If this were all that's to be said for fall, it might be just something to be savored by depressives. But assume another angle of observation. In the nascent, struggling light of a September dawn, we are not as distant from the returning shadows of dusk as we are at the start of one of those seemingly unending July days. A summer day's hot light can be relentless—why else do we spend so much summertime hunting shade? Fall is the season of soft light and gentle shadows.

And there is much to be said for soft light and shadows. As the philosopher of science Michel Serres comments, "A certain light, strong and focused, dazzles the eye, whereas placing an object in light and shadow allows us to see it. Actually, we always see in this way, in the light and shadow of the real atmosphere. The pure light of the sun would burn our eyes, and we would die of cold in the darkness."

We children of the Enlightenment, Serres worries, tend to focus on the knowledge that comes from intense light, exposing everything to maximal scrutiny. I would add that we can assume as much not only in rarefied philosophy, but in the everydayness of the "reality" TV shows that seek to expose even the most intimate secrets to public view. We can assume as much in our ongoing efforts to smash all taboos, reveal all mysteries, break down every puzzle into a problem to be solved. Serres says the ancients recognized a second kind of knowledge, one that remembers that some things must be kept in the shadows so they can be

conserved. “To wrench something from the shadows is often to destroy it. . . . Everything has its price, even clarity.”

It may be one thing for a philosopher to praise shadows, but can the theologian? After all, Genesis 1 has God delighted with the creation of light, while the same encomium is not bestowed on darkness. And followers of Christ speak of him as the light of the world, not the shadow of the ages. From the New Testament John to the 20th-century musings of Reinhold Niebuhr, Christians have recognized both children of light and children of darkness—and had little doubt in which category we belonged.

Yet that is not the whole story. In the light of fall, look again at the biblical texts. God appears not only through the burning bush, but through the cloud hovering over the tabernacle. The Holy of Holies rests in the inner recesses of the temple, deep in shadows. Even the reflection of God’s light, radiating from Moses’ face like some inverse sunburn, requires a veil before others can behold it. The law itself, says the author of the letter to the Hebrews, “has only a shadow of the good things to come,” and the cherubim do not illuminate but “overshadow the mercy seat” (10:1 and 9:5). So can mortals, so must mortals, meet the Divine not in bright and undeflected light, but in the sheltering gauze of semi-darkness. To wrench some things from the shadows is to destroy them—or to be destroyed by them.

I reread John 1 in the diffused, gentler light of fall and notice that the light that has come to the world is indeed a light that shines, but it shines “*in the darkness*” (1:5). It is not overwhelmed by the darkness, but neither does it overwhelm or eliminate the darkness. This means that the Word is surrounded by shadows. Just as we can hear God in a “still, small voice,” it appears that we can see God not only or especially in unmitigated, burning light, but in shaded and dappled light. In shadows God comes to us, and it is in those shadows that we can best see glimmers of glory, the soft glowings of truth and beauty that would be washed out and invisible in the searing light of the noonday summer sun.

I wonder if an entire theology of incarnation (and of religious pluralism?) lurks, benevolently, in the gathering shadows of fall.