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# Sensory Experience and Religious Perception: Accounts of Faith in Visually Impaired People\*

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper examines the relationship between blindness and belief in divine intervention among visually impaired individuals. Drawing on mythological, folkloric, and biblical contexts, it explores how sensory experiences, apart from sight, influence their faith narratives. Through social anthropological methods and extensive fieldwork, the study addresses key questions about the spontaneous emergence of religious themes, the transformation of these beliefs in the works of blind authors, and their role in coping with daily challenges. The analysis highlights how sensory experiences enhance faith and shape self-perception, motivating the visually impaired in their everyday lives.

**KEYWORDS:** Blindness, Divine Intervention, Sensory Experiences, Faith Narratives, Coping Mechanisms

*Seeing Is Not Believing but Believing Is Seeing\*\**

## Introduction

The narrative of belief in God and its association with blindness have deep cultural roots that can be traced in mythological and folkloric notions, biblical parables, literary works, and ordinary conversations without necessarily being

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\*\* A play on words, paraphrasing John 20:29, where Jesus says, “Thomas, you believed because you saw me; blessed are those who have not seen and have believed”.

tied to religion. Given the particular life situation, the themes of God and belief in divine interventions (usually miracles) have an enduring presence in the testimonies and narratives of persons with visual impairments. They represent a kind of appeal to a higher power to provide an answer as to why the blindness occurred, to provide help with everyday difficulties, to give something in return for the sight that was taken away, etc. Notwithstanding the differences between individual testimonies, several specific points can be noted in the narratives that the blind create about their relationship with God. First, they are the result of the accumulated mythological, folkloric, and biblical contexts discussing the relationship of blindness to God and the possible way out of the situation of not seeing. Secondly, the narrative of divine intervention generally emerges spontaneously, even when the conversation is not religiously oriented, and is associated with the occurrence of some personal miracle.

There is a clear relationship between the cases listed. The accumulated mythological, folkloric, and biblical contexts underlie the visually impaired person's belief that they have the opportunity to sense divine intervention in their life situation, and this helps to understand the spontaneous emergence of the theme of God and his presence. In contrast to the casual emergence of faith narratives in everyday conversations with visually impaired persons, there is also a contextualized notion of God in the work of blind authors that is the result of both accumulated contexts and personal miracles that have happened to the author. The narratives listed above, related to religious perception, have an important function among visually impaired people – they are highly motivating for coping with everyday difficulties and inspiring the telling and strengthening of faith. In addition to this, narratives about God and His role in a situation of blindness contain many examples of the need to accumulate various types of sensory experiences through which the belief in divine intervention is strengthened.

The research presented here focuses on the ways in which sensory experience (concerning other senses besides sight) influences the relationship between the blind and God and how this is reflected in their faith narratives. Highlighting some examples of the accumulation of cultural context as related to the notions of blindness and divine intervention, as well as spontaneously occurring and well-considered narratives about God, the paper emphasizes the functions of these narratives for the blind community and their overcoming of everyday problems. Drawing on the methods of social anthropology and years of fieldwork among people who have lost their sight, the text seeks to answer the following research questions: when and how do blind people talk about their religious notions related to divine intervention? In what ways are conceptions of God transformed in the work of blind authors? What is the function of narratives about God, and what role does the accumulation of various types of sensory experience play in increasing belief in God?

Based on the field material gathered and analysed in relation to this theme<sup>1</sup>, in this paper, I will examine, in turn, some of the cultural accumulations of context related to the relationship between blindness and divine intervention, and then provide examples of spontaneously occurring narratives of faith in conversations with the blind, with recurring motifs involving the perception of a miracle or the expectation of one, as well as show the meaningful religious perceptions in the work of a blind author. An integral part of the analysis of all the examples will be the highlighting of sensory experience, since for people with visual impairments it plays a specific role in the cognition and perception of the world, and this leads necessarily to the highlighting of this experience in religious perceptions. In the analysis of the various examples, my attention will be directed towards tracing whether there is a tension between the invisibility of God and the sense of His presence in the lives of people with visual impairments, and to what extent this gives rise to the need to talk about faith as a means of motivation for coping with everyday difficulties. The proposed analysis aims to show that not only is the theme of God present in the faith narratives of people with visual impairments, but that it also shapes and forms their self-perception. Not being able to see divine interventions activates the other senses and engages them so that the blind persons accumulate sensory experience, and become registrars of what is happening around them, refracting their specific life situation through perceptions of divine intervention and presence in the person's world.

### **Blindness and Divine Appearances (Cultural Contexts)**

The condition of blindness transcends ordinary human experience, and it might be possible to draw an analogy with Mircea Eliade's ideas about the images and symbols that represent reality. Woven into narratives, symbols are more significant than historical events. The motif of blindness recurs in various religious texts, and this underlines its symbolic significance. According to Eliade: "When a myth is told, it is as if in some way that sacred time during which the events mentioned in the narrative took place were reactivated" (Eliade 1998: 53). On the basis of these reflections, the author draws several other conclusions, such as, for example, the desire of traditional society to separate mythological time from secular time or the constant actualization of the events narrated in myths. The tales of blind prophets, which we find in various mythologies and later in religious texts, are part of these narratives that destroy secular time and affirm the relationship between ordinary people and the gods. Moreover, such communication between the sacred and the profane is accomplished through signs and symbols, and to reinforce the feeling that a certain action is being performed, it is indispensable for the deity to be invisible. In this respect, only divine manifestations are clearly visible and recognizable to the common people.

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1 Field material collected between 2014 and 2024 served as the basis for writing this article. The selected materials were gathered during my training as a guide for visually impaired persons, conducted at the National Center for Rehabilitation of the Blind – Plovdiv in 2019, as well as during my postdoctoral research, conducted during December 2022–2024.

Culturally, getting closer to the sacred and the secret has its consequences in the human world. According to Eliade, when the profane is imbued with the sacred, there is divine intervention (Eliade 1994). Such is the case of healing<sup>2</sup> the sick. In both biblical stories discussed later in the text, healing takes place in full view of all and through a strong faith in God. The connection between blindness and faith is very strongly felt in these narratives. Lack of sight is both a physical infirmity and a spiritual lack – they are reflected in the Bible in this way. Certainly, physical blindness can be healed with a very strong faith or by resorting to one of the sacraments of the Orthodox religion – eleosanctification. Spiritual blindness, by contrast, is one that believers must guard against and pray earnestly that it will not befall them. In the performance of this sacrament, reserved for very sick people, there participate seven priests, and the sick person is anointed with an elixir. It is explicitly stressed that healing depends on the strength of one's faith. The presence of a visible (physical) aspect in the performance of the ritual is precisely the point at which the profane and the sacred meet, and so divine intervention can be accounted for.

According to the biblical concept, the so-called revelation (epiphany) “involves something hidden being revealed so that its essence can be seen and known” (Bibleyski rechnik 1994: 384). Vihra Baeva describes miracle in narratives as “entering of the sacred into the human world” (Baeva 2013: 32). Within this article, I will try to position the narratives of divine intervention, personal miracles and the expectation of these made by visually impaired persons among the narratives of healing according to the classification proposed by Baeva (2005, 2013). It is also appropriate to introduce the term of action-miracle, which Albena Georgieva considers to be a basic element in etiological legends as “a link between the two components of the was-became opposition” (Georgieva 1990: 58). In the narratives of people who lost their sight later in life, the tension happens between what was and what can be observed. On the one side there is placed life with sight and on the other – life without it. Conversely, one can also juxtapose a life without the strong presence of God and one in which the blind isolate themselves and, rather, seek answers for their condition. The occurrence or expectation of a miracle in the lives of visually handicapped people is associated in two different ways with the perception of divine intervention. On the one hand, there is the expectation for a miracle to happen and for blindness to “go away” from the blind person's life; on the other hand, the actual registering of a miracle occurs through the accumulation of sensory experience, and both experiences lead to a strengthening of faith. Narratives of divine intervention by visually handicapped persons can be taken as accounts of miracles, but with some qualifications. As Baeva reflects in her research, stories of miracles have com-

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2 Bulgarian folklore abounds with tales and legends of living water, healing *ayazmas* and healing eye watter (see Arnaudov 1971, 1972; Georgiev 1989; Mankova 1989; Georgieva I. 1993; Neikova 2002).

mon motifs – such motifs can also be observed in the narratives of visually impaired people, however, given that these are elements of accumulated ideas and images resulting from religious and/or folkloric accumulations. A second caveat I would like to point out is that the narrative related to the occurrence or expectation of a miracle can also be found in an already revised and meaningful text with a visually impaired author, and in this sense, such a narrative would stand on the borderline between narratives and literary elaborations of the theme of miracles. In either case, narratives of this type are imbued with a deep faith in God and His power. Personal stories in which God is invoked are associated with moments of crisis and significant changes in people's lives, and are often interpreted by the means of an idea of protection and communication between people and deities (Hunter 2012). Such narratives have a specific role in the lives of people with visual impairments – they motivate many of their decisions on a day-to-day level, and this brings with it a further accumulation of sensory experience. Moreover, the personal stories in which God appears and helps a person provide one with comfort and peace. In the case of persons with visual impairments, this is of utmost importance for learning useful skills to cope with the difficulties that the situation of being blind presents them with. Many of my respondents claimed that their faith in God was strengthened when they had mastered and completed specific tasks in their daily lives (e.g., navigated urban space without difficulty). During the leadership training I participated in, very special attention was paid to the motivation of the visually impaired – one of the keys to this is the belief that everything will be okay and they will cope with and get out of the situation they are in. This is also the recommendation of professionals who develop plans to integrate the blind into society, such as the recommendations for motivation that Arsova gives in her textbook on orientation and mobility (Arsova 2008).

In this case, the inability to see (in a physiological and metaphorical sense) is a condition that can be a key moment in experiencing and narrating divine revelation. There is a tension here that arises from the idea that everything that can be seen can be explained. This cultural model has a strong presence in Western culture, in which seeing is the sense that is elevated to a pedestal, and it is only the possibility of seeing that provides one with the ability to understand something in its totality (Ffytche et al. 1998; Goodale 2004; Heath 2016).

I would like to add another dimension to this understanding-centered model: the linguistic perspective. Across languages, there is a clear connection between blindness, understanding, and the concept of divine intervention. For instance, in English, the expression “I see” is commonly used to mean “I understand”. The same applies in French with “Je vois”, which also means “I understand”. In Bulgarian, phrases like “I see what this is about” or “I have a view on the matter” carry a similar connotation. These linguistic examples highlight how vision, as a metaphor for understanding, is deeply embedded in language and reinforces people's cognitive grasp of a subject.

This connection between sight and knowledge also has important religious, mythological, and folkloric implications. The inability to gain knowledge through vision offers at least two interpretive paths. First, there is a reliance on the enhancement of other senses, such as smell. For example, a religious service might evoke specific sensory experiences – like the scent of wax, flowers, herbs, or dampness – that can become significant for individuals who lack sight<sup>3</sup>. On the other hand, we should not overlook the fact that most manifestations of divine power remain equally (in)visible to the majority of believers. In this sense, God must be invisible in order to be truly felt and for His presence to be recognized (Nightingale 2016). It is important to clarify that the ability to see does not always equate with the ability to perceive or understand something. “Seeing”, in this context, is a skill that can be learned through techniques that allow an individual to cognitively process and recognize different situations, people, and objects, leading to informed decisions. Only in this cognitive framework can we equate seeing with understanding, where seeing becomes a potent metaphor for knowledge and human insight. A Dutch proverb says “The blindest is the one who does not want to see”, underscoring the metaphorical link between sight and knowledge. A Danish proverb offers a different perspective: “The sky is not less blue because the blind cannot see it”. This reflects the dominant worldview of those who can see, where the reality of the sky’s blueness exists independently of whether it is seen or not. This highlights the idea that while some things may be invisible to the sightless, other things remain invisible to both the sighted and the blind alike. This distinction touches on the social and cultural interpretations of perception versus the actual physical realities at play<sup>4</sup>.

Sensibility, meant as the way people experience their sensorial surroundings, is a part of the culture of individuals; the sense of God’s presence and His intervention in the lives of people with visual impairments is specifically conditioned by different social and cultural norms. The faith narrative has a specific place in this group, because in the case of sightless persons, their sense of the world is based on residual senses, and this gives rise to the tensions I have already mentioned. The inability to see God is valid for both the sighted and the blind, but the sense of His presence is built on a different sensory experience. Perhaps this is also why so much cultural context is built up linking blindness and divine intervention, propagating the notion that the lack of sight “unlocks” another relationship with God, bestowing the ability to see beyond.

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3 For more information, see Cadbury 1928: 237–256; Green 2015: 146–157.

4 “The physical universe does not contain colors, sounds, or smells; it contains frequencies, amplitudes, and certain types of molecules. Perceptual systems decode physical energies and build representations that reflect reality. So, colors and sounds are not inherent features of the physical world; they are mental properties that exist as a result of us experiencing certain forms of energy. A tree falling in the forest makes no sound if no one is there to hear it. It makes a pressure wave travelling at 700 miles per hour; sounds are made in the brain of an observer” (Dietrich 2007).

Physical blindness can be perceived in two opposite ways. On the one hand, it can be viewed as a punishment for one's accumulated sins. On the other hand, it can be read as a sign of divine favor. An example of this dual conception can be taken from Greek mythology and the accounts of the life of Tiresias, one of the great seers. There is no single account of how Tiresias lost his sight: according to some, it was when he saw the goddess Athena bathing. She punished him by blinding him, but then gave him prophetic powers. According to other versions, Hera herself blinded Tiresias after he revealed the secrets of the feminine essence. According to both versions, however, oracular abilities have come to replace the denied ability to see. Another very important connection can be glimpsed here – the deities are not only invisible, but they must also remain unseen, for punishment follows if this is violated.

In religious terms, too, there can be found examples of the connection between blindness and divine interventions. Here I will give just two examples from the Bible in which the intervention of God brings about healing of blindness. These examples are appropriate for illustrating the desire for deliverance from the condition of blindness, but not only insofar as they are themselves motivators for coping with everyday difficulties. In the parable of the healing of Bartholomew, as related by Mark (Mark 10, 46–52)<sup>5</sup>, two very clear messages are contained. First, blindness can be healed when God intervenes. Secondly, only faith in the Lord can save all who suffer. These two messages are at the heart of the motivation for strong faith among the visually impaired. The other parable tells of the healing of a man born blind who also believed in the power of God, which helped him to see. In the parable of the man born blind, there is also a tension between seeing and understanding the presence of God. In the way it is presented in the ninth chapter of John's Gospel<sup>6</sup>, it is not the physical ability to see that is important in understanding the divine, but the belief that it exists. Again, this is where the idea of metaphorical and physical blindness comes in.

Knowledge of the sacraments and the divine world requires specific perceptions beyond what is understood as normal. For the situation of not seeing, where people compensate for their lack of sight with their other senses, for example, movement in space is based on faith in newly acquired skills (Arsova 2008). In his book *Myth and Reality*, Mircea Eliade (2001) says that understand-

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5 “Then they come to Jericho. And as Jesus was going out of Jericho with his disciples and a multitude of people, Bartimaeus the son of Timaeus, who was blind, was sitting in the road begging. And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he cried out, saying, Son of David, Jesus, have mercy on me. Many rebuked him, that he would hold his peace: but he cried the more, Son of David, have mercy on me. Jesus stood still and commanded that he should be called. And they called the blind man, and said unto him, take courage, arise, he cried unto thee. He threw off his upper garment, arose, and came to Jesus. And answering him, Jesus said to him, what do you want me to do for you? And the blind man said unto him, I will see, Master. Jesus said unto him, go thy way: thy faith hath saved thee. And immediately he saw and followed Jesus on the way” (Mark 10, 46–52).

6 See the Gospel of John chapter 9.

ing religious symbols and myths leads to the awareness of deeper realities that are necessarily invisible to humans. In this regard, God must be invisible to believers, but His intervention in people's lives can be seen. And herein arises the tension between the sighted and the sightless in their religious perceptions. The sense of God's presence usually excludes sight and relies on other sensory perceptions. The different degree to which the sighted and the blind use their senses gives rise to the specific way of perceiving God, and this, in turn, leads to the desire to narrate this life experience.

### **In a Quest for God**

In the present case study, conversations about God and his intervention in people's lives emerged spontaneously without the need to engage in a strictly religious dialogue with respondents. The first example that will add a touch to the understanding of the spontaneous emergence of the topic of God and belief in Him is from a free conversation held at the National Centre for Rehabilitation of the Blind – Plovdiv. Respondent 1 had lost his sight a few months before our meeting and was placed in the center to learn basic skills to cope with new challenges in his life<sup>7</sup>. Among the basic courses there was one in reading Braille. The respondent was looking forward to learning this skill, rather than learning how to walk with a white cane or how to cook his meals; it was extremely important for him to get in touch with books and start reading again. I had a very long conversation with him, during which we inevitably came to the subject of God and His manifestations:

Respondent1: I don't know why this [going blind – M. S.] happened to me... Now the most important thing for me is to learn to use Braille and start reading again. Do you think I can read the Bible in Braille?

M. S.: Yes, it's in Braille for sure! Why do you want to start there? Isn't it a very big and difficult read?

Respondent 1: I don't know, maybe, I'll find an answer or start believing more... (sigh).

M. S.: Are you a believer?

Respondent 1: I'm not sure, but I'll probably have to believe in something since I haven't seen anything so far in life...

M. S.: In what sense have you not seen?

Respondent 1: I haven't seen miracles happen, but they might happen now right?

M. S.: Probably if you believe strongly and learn to move on your own, cook, do your own laundry and read!

Respondent 1: There, that would be a miracle, to read the Bible in Braille!

M. S.: I wish it for you sincerely! (Terrain Diary, 2019, NCRB-Plovdiv; transl. M. S.).

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7 Respondent 1 is a man about 75 years old (as of 2019) who has an academic career.



The conversation reflects the intimate moment of deep spiritual reflection and the first steps in the search for faith. Losing his sight meant that Respondent 1 was unable to read and use literature as a means of finding answers, not only in the spiritual sphere, but also in academic terms. For him, reading was the way to access God's word, and using Braille would make this possible. In the theological literature (Gregory 1987; Hunter 2012; Clements 2015), being in a difficult situation causes people to move through and accept a deeper spiritual understanding of what is happening. This quest is consistent with biblical narratives in which blindness often leads to a deeper understanding or encounter with the divine. It is in this difficult situation that the hope for a miracle emerges, as well as the belief that the presence and intervention of God is possible. Respondent 1's statement "I have not seen miracles happen, but they might happen now" reflects a strong desire to believe in the presence of divine power. Furthermore, the expectation of miracles occurring indicates a transition in moral terms from the material and visible to the spiritual and intangible. The stronger the faith, the stronger the sense of God's presence. This passage reflects the Christian idea that true faith does not require physical evidence of God's presence, but, rather, an inner conviction. The loss of sight puts the respondent in a situation where he must rely on his other senses and accumulate sensory experiences such as reading Braille. In this way, he will be able to reach the texts of the Bible more easily. In this case, faith and sensory experience are related and mutually condition each other. On the one hand, there is the need for sensory skills with which to reach the sacred texts.

On the other hand, the very belief in divine intervention reinforces the desire to accumulate sensory experience. It is important for the respondent to learn to read, he believes that by this act he will get closer to the Bible, and this will help him to rediscover faith, and it will give him the courage to tackle the other difficult parts of learning that lie ahead. It was very important for me as an active participant in this conversation not to interrupt the participant's desire for a relationship with God, but also to restate the more significant things for this moment from my point of view – learning to walk, to take care of himself. What happened is an example of the particular perception of the situation from a sensory point of view. On the one hand, since Respondent 1 has fallen into a situation of not seeing, he must cope with new challenges, and finding his way to reading (which is so familiar to him) is a kind of compensatory mechanism. For him, learning Braille is a complex task that is underpinned by a desire to find a strong faith in God. And in this sense, the connection to the divine takes on the function of a strong motivation for acquiring new sensory skills. On the other hand, when observing this process, I assess the situation based on what I see – a cultural pattern that has been ingrained in me. Relying on my senses, I assume that the challenges he will face in managing his daily tasks are numerous and difficult to overcome. In this context, I acknowledge the respondent's desire to learn Braille and access the Bible, but I also emphasize that there are more immediate priorities. The difference in

our sensory experiences heightens the tension between seeing and not seeing, creating gaps in our communication.

### **Finding Your Way to God**

Another example of the spontaneous narrative of faith and God comes from my conversation with Respondent 2. Unlike the previous interviewee, Respondent 2 is younger and has been blind for many years. The interview conditions were similar, but there was a significant difference between the respondents in terms of both their age and experience with vision impairment. Respondent 2 lost his sight at an early age and has long since learned how to handle daily tasks. He was attending a vocational massage course at a center, which would provide him with a trade. Living in a small village where everyone knew him, his favorite pastime was experimenting with computers and adapting old radio stations to listen to conversations between international truck drivers. Over time, he had connected with these individuals, and, as he put it, this allowed him to “travel all over the world”. Our discussion about God happened by chance.

Respondent 2: I ride an old bicycle.

M. S.: But how do you ride it when you can't see? Don't you bump into things on the road?

Respondent 2: No, I know the way, I always drive on the shady part of the street, under some trees there. However, one day someone had stopped his car there and I bumped into it.

M. S.: And what happened? Did you hit yourself?

Respondent 2: No, but how much I cursed at him... And when he came out of the house and when I asked him why he had stopped there, didn't he know that I was passing by there?

M. S.: Well, the guy wanted to park in the shade... however, he didn't know that that's when you'd set off on your bike!

Respondent 2: He already knows! Do you want me to tell you how I started riding...

M. S.: Yes, of course,

Respondent 2: One day I remembered the old bike I used to ride, and it was like God told me to go and find it and ride it.

M. S.: How come?

Respondent 2: Yeah, I felt like I wasn't alone and that nothing bad was going to happen to me [pause, thoughtful].

M. S.: And then what happened?

Respondent 2: I found the bike, pinched the white cane on the rack, tripped two, three times on the pedals, but found the door and got out and swung... I told you already, it was like God was leading me. Nothing bad happened (Terrain Diary, 2019, NCRB-Plovdiv; transl. M. S.).

Cycling and traveling (driving) initially seem completely out of reach for a blind person. In the quoted account, however, the impossibility of visiting different countries can be overcome through speech (the respondent listens to conversations on a radio station). Elements of strong faith and the narration of a personal miracle are evident in the narrative. However, it requires a greater set of sensory skills to be able to cycle. The village in which the described situation takes place provides multiple physical and social barriers to overcome. Respondent 2 must use his memory of the place (from when he saw it), his sense of distance, and his sense of going from sun to shade, to recognize the soundscape around him. All of the sensory skills listed and the ability to ride a bicycle (a skill acquired before the respondent became visually impaired) are prerequisites for the respondent to act on the question. In this particular situation, the effort to find his bicycle and start riding it has been supported by a strong belief in divine intervention. The ability to ride on a familiar road, the confidence that nothing bad will happen to the respondent is narrated with elements of the miraculous. Thus, the epiphany consists in the notion that God told him to go and find his bicycle, and then in the sense of being led by God as he rode. In this case, a blind man riding a bicycle can also be seen as an expression of symbolic trust in a higher power that remains unseen, but that guides one and gives one confidence in the good outcome of things.

### **The Miracle and Its Expectation**

The last example of the spontaneous occurrence of the theme of faith in God also took place in the Center for Rehabilitation of the Blind – Plovdiv. The interview involved a lady of about 60 years of age, with whom we talked about the difficulties of the rehabilitation process and the need for support in the family. The main topic of the conversation was accessibility in urban spaces, but the topic of God and miracles spontaneously came up.

M. S.: Tell me how you started going out again. Were there difficulties that you encountered along the way, was the city an accessible place for you?

Respondent 3: It was very hard for me to believe what was happening! I had stayed in my chair at home for hours asking myself why me? I didn't have an answer... My relatives would make me go out and walk around. I understood I had to in order to stay out, but I had no desire to go out since I couldn't see anything... I don't know if the city was accessible, I didn't want to set foot in it!

M. S.: I understand! What made you go out?

Respondent 3: It had been many months when I first felt the urge to go out. I remember that I had started to get used to the idea that everything would be all right, but I would have to wait a bit. So I asked my son to take me out for a walk. It was beautiful, I remember how it felt

like God sent us wind and then rain. I could feel the breeze in my face, and then I felt like I could feel every little drop that fell on me. It was very magical to me!

M. S.: Did that spark your desire to go out and want to learn to get around on your own?

Respondent 3: I remember that in the months that followed I wanted to go out often to look for these little signs that God sends us and eventually it was a miracle to me that I went out and wanted to be out again.

M. S.: How far did you get with learning the white cane techniques?

Respondent 3: I don't want to learn them. I've made a deal with God that if I keep finding [His help and presence] everywhere, He will help me, guide me, and why not start seeing again. I believe this miracle is possible! (Terrain Diary, 2019, NCRB-Plovdiv; transl. M. S.)

Learning the techniques of using a white cane is fundamental to leading an independent and fulfilling life for blind individuals. Mastering orientation and mobility skills provides a sense of freedom and independence, yet many visually impaired people lose motivation either before or during their training. The belief in a higher power guiding them along this path is a recurring theme in these spontaneous narratives. The hope that a miracle will occur and restore their sight is often central to the idea that the stronger the belief in God, the greater the possibility of healing. The conversation quoted earlier aligns with miracle narratives in two ways: on the one hand, Respondent 3 recognized the miracle in her changed attitude and behavior toward the world. On the other hand, there is still an expectation of a future miracle-healing. A key characteristic of these spontaneous accounts of divine presence and miraculous intervention in the lives of the blind is that they differ from traditional religious miracle stories that include physical healing. In the cases described, there is a heightened belief in divine intervention, even when no actual miracle has taken place.

The conversations highlight the connection between divine intervention and blindness, underscoring the role of sensory experience in deepening one's faith in God. For individuals with visual impairments, the presence of a higher power is perceived through other senses, reinforcing their spiritual belief. This narrative aligns with a broader cultural and religious framework wherein blindness is often linked to spiritual insight and divine interaction. The personal accounts of miracles add depth to our understanding of how people experience faith, illustrating a relationship with the invisible God that surpasses the boundaries of physical sight.

### **Meaningful Narratives about Faith and God**

Spontaneous conversations about faith and God's presence often arise in the lives of visually impaired individuals. However, when it comes to the work of blind authors, such reflections are more deliberate and thoughtful. Blind writ-

ers in Bulgaria, including those featured in personal poetry collections, short stories, novels, and the monthly publication of the Union of the Blind, entitled “Zari” (Dawn)<sup>8</sup>, explore their relationship with God in a more intentional manner. In this article, I focus on the works of Rумыana Kamenska-Donkova, a well-known author within the blind community who has a strong connection to religion. Kamenska-Donkova’s writing frequently highlights the relationship between blindness and divine intervention, with faith and divine assistance playing central roles in her narratives. Born on May 25, 1963, in the town of Bankya near Sofia, Kamenska-Donkova was blind from birth. Writing became a source of salvation for her, and she developed an early passion for it. After completing her education at the Louis Braille Special School for Visually Impaired Students, she went on to study Bulgarian Philology at Sofia University. She later worked as a Braille keyboardist, editor, and proofreader at the Braille Printing House of the Union of the Blind. Kamenska-Donkova has published extensively, contributing to literary clubs, newspapers, and magazines such as “Zari”, “Puls”, “Chitalishte”, “Woman Today”, and “Plamak”. Her poetry has been awarded in various competitions, and a documentary film has been made about her life and work. Her first poetry collection, *Heavenly Bread*, was published in 1996, followed by her autobiographical book *Daddy’s Princess* in 2009. In the preface to her poetry collection *Heavenly Bread* (1996), Rумыana Kamenska-Donkova reflects on her journey to faith, stating:

For a long time, I lived, caught up in the cares of the day, and didn’t feel the time passing. My husband and I painfully wondered if there wasn’t something to fill the emptiness of our hearts. Then we found the Bible. We listened to it on tape. After years of [it] being banned from our phonograph library, they had agreed to record it. We read it without prejudice, accepting it as an expression of our Creator’s will for us. We understood that the lonely emptiness from which we suffer so much is not the natural state of man. [...] We chose our Savior Jesus Christ as our friend and guide in life. The threatening emptiness is gone because God has left room in our hearts for Himself that we try so hard to fill with something else. I hadn’t written in a long time. When I believed, I wanted to share my happiness and fullness with others. I wrote many things in a short time, and I am giving them to you because now I have something very important to say – God loves you and asks you to accept His will in your life (Kamenska-Donkova 1996: 1; transl. M. S.).

The author shares a personal journey of faith and the discovery of God in everyday life. The quest for understanding her blindness is a central theme not only in Rумыana Kamenska-Donkova’s work but also in the experiences of many others. In her case, the inability to see is framed as part of God’s will

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8 Such authors are Trayan Tamen, Rумыana Kamenska-Donkova, Spas Karamfezov and many others.

and solution, providing her with alternatives to navigate her challenges, such as reading the Bible and gaining insight into its meanings. This illustrates the profound interconnection between faith and the unseen divine presence.

Kamenska-Donkova's narrative highlights a unique sensory experience – listening to the Bible on tape. The absence of visual elements, such as the texture, thickness, and color of the pages, as well as the smell of the ink and the weight of the book, does not detract from her understanding of the content. Instead, it enhances her focus and engagement. In this context, her sense of God's power and faith transcends traditional sensory perceptions, transforming into a creative expression. Moreover, her journey of faith parallels those narratives found in accounts of fortune-tellers and prophets, who, despite their blindness, are believed to possess the gift of seeing beyond physical reality.

Rumiana Kamenska-Donkova's collection of poems is filled with examples of the search for and finding of God, as well as numerous allegories with biblical texts. I will give examples with two of her poems. The first is the poem *Do not stop*:

Don't stop anywhere on your way,  
when the Lord your God leads you.  
He chooses the best for you,  
accept the wise lesson.

In thy quiet days forget Him not,  
Drink from the fountain of wisdom,  
let not slumber lay thee flat  
In the soft carpet of sloth.

If any man shall say unto thee,  
another time God hath prepared for us.  
Into the sacred word thou dost plunge,  
Listen only to His voice.

If you fall in the bloody battle  
Thy brother, in thy weakness, tempted,  
Thou shalt give him thy hand, support him,  
But not fall into seduction with him.

Do not let fear overtake you,  
when hard times come.  
God says,  
I am at your right hand.

I will be with you in deserts and fires,  
I will save thee from the elements,  
through the troubles on eagles' wings  
With honour and glory will I carry thee.

Leave not care or boredom.  
To make jealousy for God.  
Thy rest is not here,  
It waits for thee there in eternity

Никъде по пътя си не спирай,  
щом те води Господ, твоят Бог.  
Най-доброто Той за теб избира,  
приеми премъдрия урок.

В дни спокойни ти не Го забравяй,  
пий от извора на мъдростта,  
да не те положи дрямка равна  
в мекия килим на леността.

Ако някой каже ти: – Върни се,  
друг път Бог приготвил е за нас.  
В словото свещено ти вгълби се,  
слушай само Неговия глас.

Ако падне в кървавата битка  
брат ти, в слабостта си изкушен,  
ти ръка подай му, подкрепи го,  
но не падай с него съблазнен.

Не допускай страх да те обхване,  
като дойдат трудни времена.  
Казва Бог: – Каквото и да стане,  
Аз съм ти от дясната страна.

С теб ще съм в пустини и огньове,  
от стихии ще те спася,  
през бедите на крила орлови  
с чест и слава ще те пренеса.

Не оставяй грижи или скука  
да приспят за Бога ревността.  
Твоята почивка не е тука,  
тя те чака там, във вечността.

(Kamenska-Donkova 1996; transl. M. S.)

The quoted poem is rich with biblical references from both the Old and the New Testament. A central theme in the work of blind authors is the quest for trust in God's power, along with a sense of His presence and guidance. Lacking visual imagery due to their sensory deprivation, these authors rely on metaphors and expressions that resonate emotionally and spiritually. This stylistic choice has a profound impact, conveying the essence of what the author perceives as the power of true faith.

Rumyana Kamenska-Donkova emphasizes her connection with God through several biblical allusions. Notably, the poem's title echoes its opening line: "Do not stop anywhere on your way when the Lord your God leads you". This exhortation is reminiscent of Proverbs 3:5–6, which advises: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways obey him, and he will make your paths straight". Other lines address the challenges of blindness, conveying reassurance: "He chooses what is best for you; accept the wise lesson"<sup>9</sup>, and "Do not let fear overtake you when hard times come. God says, 'Whatever happens, I am at your right hand'"<sup>10</sup>.

Rich in biblical allusions, Rumiana Kamenska-Donkova's poem serves as a profound reflection on faith and the divine presence in the lives of individuals facing challenges. By drawing on biblical texts, the author transcends her personal experiences, addressing universal themes related to the relationship with God. The biblical references in the poem create a framework for understanding the connection between the divine and human experience, particularly through the perspective of those with sensory impairments. The teachings from Proverbs, John, and Isaiah resonate throughout the poem, reinforcing the concepts of trust in divine wisdom and the enduring presence of God.

The second poem also seeks answers to questions about the presence of God in the life of the blind, as well as answers about the condition of blindness. The poem is titled *A Christian's Dream*.

I had a dream. A lifetime passed  
Like a film strip in front of me.  
Along the sea stormy walk  
Jesus and I walked on a summer day.

On the sand were the footprints  
Of our footsteps and I understood  
How steadfastly my Redeemer  
Walked beside me every day and hour.

Next to my footsteps were His.  
But how so? Puzzled, I paused,  
I turned in alarm and fear –  
I saw lonely footprints in the sand.

Сънувах сън. Премина цял животът  
като на лента филмова пред мен.  
Покрай морето бурно на разходка  
Исус и аз вървахме в летен ден.

По пясъка оставаха следите  
от стъпките ни и разбирах аз,  
как неотклонно моят изкупител  
до мен вървял е всеки ден и час.

До стъпките ми Неговите бяха.  
Но как така? Озадачен се спрях,  
обърнах се с тревога и уплаха –  
следи самотни в пясъка съзрях.

9 Jeremiah 29:11: "For I know the plans I have for you", declares the Lord, "plans to benefit you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future".

10 Isaiah 41:10: "Therefore do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with My righteous right hand".

I recalled. Those were terrible days  
Of hopelessness, pain and struggle.  
To the Lord the voiceless prayers  
Were barely sent.

“Saviour”, I cried in a voice of resignation,  
“Thou art so good, but why I know not  
In my hardest days Thou hast forsaken me,  
In my most fiery hour to be alone”.

“Friend, do not look so despondently  
The lonely footprints on the sand.  
When there is no strength left in thee  
I carried thee through fire and waters”.

(Kamenska-Donkova 1996; transl. M. S.)

Припомних си. То бяха дни ужасни  
на безнадеждност, болка и борба.  
Към Господа молитвите безгласни  
душата ми отправяше едва.

– Спасителю, – изрекох с глас сподавен –  
ти толкоз благ си, но защо не знам  
в най-трудните ми дни си ме оставил,  
в най-огнения час да бъда сам.

– Приятелю, не гледай тъй унило  
по пясъка самотните следи.  
Когато в тебе не остана сила  
Аз носех те през огън и води.

Similar to the spontaneous narratives of God’s presence discussed earlier, Romyana Kamenska’s poem depicts the concept of God as a constant companion throughout life. The act of walking together symbolizes divine guidance and support, embodying the active presence of God in the believer’s journey. As the speaker grapples with the reasons for their blindness, feelings of loneliness and abandonment emerge, echoing the sentiment of Psalm 22:1. This quest for divine intervention reveals a profound theological message about the nature of God’s love and care. The assurance, “I have brought you through fire and waters”, resonates with biblical passages, such as Isaiah 43:2, which promise God’s support during times of trial and tribulation. The metaphor of being carried “through fire and waters” highlights God’s protective and nurturing qualities, emphasizing His role as a savior who intervenes in the believers’ lives during their darkest hours. The poem concludes with a personal revelation from the author, where the lonely footprints symbolize moments when Jesus carried the individual. Rather than viewing blindness as a form of punishment or abandonment, it transforms into an experience of God’s presence, aligning with the broader Christian narrative of spiritual growth through adversity.

## Conclusion

The relationship between faith, sensory experience, and the invisibility of God is intricate and multifaceted. The analysis of the examples presented reveals that gaining concrete sensory experiences is crucial for visually impaired individuals to perceive God’s presence. These faith narratives emerge from a rich tapestry of cultural contexts, including mythological, folkloric, and biblical influences. In their daily lives, visually impaired individuals often discuss divine intervention spontaneously, even outside explicitly religious conversations. Blind writers articulate their relationship with God, constructing narratives based on the sensory experiences accumulated since their blindness.

This article concludes that the tension between God’s invisibility and religious perception is navigated through the activation of the other senses. Narratives of faith and miraculous interventions play a vital role in the blind com-



munity, serving as motivational tools to confront the challenges of blindness. Therefore, prioritizing the sensory experiences of people with visual impairments in exploring their religious perceptions can facilitate a more systematic understanding of their faith narratives.

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