

## “Where is your God now?”

St Bernardine of Siena

Adult Faith Enrichment

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*My tears have become my bread  
By night, by day,  
As I hear it said all the day long:  
‘Where is your God?’*

.....

*With cries that pierce me to the heart,  
my enemies revile me,  
saying to me all the day long:  
‘Where is your God?’*

Psalm 41 (42)

*Introduction: has God disappeared?*

The title of this talk – ‘Where is your God now?’ – may sound strange or new. But it really only echoes concerns that are found at the very start of our religion, indeed even before the emergence of the Christian faith itself. Already in the Old Testament the question of God’s whereabouts is often raised, explicitly or implicitly. Psalm 41 (42) could be cited as one place where this theme is clearly found. And perhaps even in the scene at the empty tomb in St John’s Gospel (John 20: 2), there is an indirect allusion to the ancient question of where God is to be found, when at the empty tomb of Jesus Mary Magdalene says in alarm to Simon Peter and the other disciple who was with him at the time: ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!’

Yet some might be wondering about the presence of the word ‘now’ in the title, seeing that it perhaps suggests the notion of change in God. The question might, in other words, lead some to suspect that where God is now, could possibly be somewhere different from where God was yesterday, or a thousand years ago, or a million years ago. Normally, however, in the classical Christian tradition at any rate, God is thought of as not changing at all. And that strikes me as pretty central to Christianity. So, the ‘now’ part of the question should not unduly alarm us. It is simply a way of drawing attention to the existential importance of belief in God. In other words, it’s a way of saying that God has to be of relevance to each particular human circumstance, to each moment of time, to every ‘now.’ Any other kind of God, that is to say, a God not in contact with human beings, even if his existence could be shown, would be of no interest to humanity.

As regards the first part of the question, the ‘where’ part, that should not be too difficult to deal with either. You’re probably familiar with the story of the rabbi who promised a child a florin if he could tell him where God was. The child replied that he would give the rabbi two florins if he could tell him where God was not.<sup>1</sup> In short, God is everywhere, and always everywhere. So, maybe we could end the

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<sup>1</sup> Related, for example, by Peter Seewald in Joseph Ratzinger, *Gott und die Welt. Glauben und Leben in unserer Zeit. Ein Gespräch mit Peter Seewald* (Munich: DVA, 2000), 90.

talk at this point, with this answer, that God, who is unchanging, is everywhere, now and always.

But, as Emily Dickinson once remarked: ‘They say that God is everywhere, and yet we always think of Him as somewhat of a recluse.’<sup>2</sup> And there’s the rub. It’s all fine and well to say that theoretically God is omnipresent and immutable, to use the classical expressions traditionally applied to God. But if people have no longer any immediate sense of God, how far do such theological assurances take us?

Emily Dickinson made her observation in the nineteenth century. Now, in the twenty-first century, God’s reclusive nature may appear, to some at least, to have intensified. And it’s not just because the scanning of even the outer reaches of the vast cosmos in which we find ourselves hasn’t revealed any unambiguous evidence of a divine presence. Nor, for that matter, has the increased scanning of humanity’s inner world in recent centuries turned up any unambiguous evidence of divinity.

On the contrary, scrutiny of the wickedness that characterized so much of the twentieth century, but not only the twentieth, has led some to conclude, with Stendhal, that ‘God’s only excuse is that he does not exist.’<sup>3</sup> The German-language Jewish writer, Elias Canetti, to take an example from the last century, wrote: ‘There can be no Creator, simply because his grief at the fate of his creation would be inconceivable and unendurable.’<sup>4</sup>

Canetti himself, of course, did not have to endure personally the fate of so many of his fellow-Jews in the Holocaust. He managed to find safety in England before the Second World War began. In that sense, perhaps the witness to the absence of God is even more powerful in the case of another twentieth-century writer, Primo Levi, who did end up in the extermination camp at Auschwitz, but survived. His is one of the most poignant voices from the last, grim century to express the challenge of evil and innocent suffering to any belief in a just, let alone loving, God. In *The Drowned and the Saved*, he writes:

Like [Jean] Améry, I too entered the Lager as a non-believer, and as a non-believer I was liberated and have lived to this day; actually, the experience of the Lager with its frightful iniquity has confirmed me in my laity. It has prevented me, and still prevents me, from conceiving of any form of providence or transcendent justice.<sup>5</sup>

Levi’s inability to countenance belief in a just providential order is unforgettably conveyed in his confession of how he resisted the temptation to pray in his place of torment. His words, which show how he kept faith with his own unbelief, are a harrowing but wonderfully human testimony to one man’s sublime integrity against unimaginable odds:

I must nevertheless admit that I experienced (and again only once) the temptation to yield, to seek refuge in prayer. This happened in the October of 1944, in the one moment in which I lucidly perceived the imminence of death. Naked and compressed among my naked companions with my personal index card in hand, I was waiting to file past the ‘commission’ that with one glance would decide whether I should immediately go into the gas chamber or was instead strong enough to go on working. For one instant I felt the need to ask for help and asylum; then, despite my anguish, equanimity prevailed: you do not change the rules of the game at the end of the match, nor when you are losing. A prayer under these conditions would have been not only absurd (what rights could I claim? and from

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<sup>2</sup> Emily Dickinson (1830-1886), quoted in Joan Konner (ed.), *The Atheist’s Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 21.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London: Collins, 1970), ix.

<sup>4</sup> Elias Canetti, quoted in Joan Konner (ed.), *The Atheist’s Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 51.

<sup>5</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, tr. R. Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1989) 117. (Jean Améry, the name taken in the 1930s by the Austrian Jewish intellectual Hans Mayer, also survived the Nazi death camps and also, like Primo Levi, eventually took his own life, although apparently in Levi’s case the evidence is not entirely clear.)

whom?) but blasphemous, obscene, laden with the greatest impiety of which a non-believer is capable. I rejected that temptation: I knew that otherwise were I to survive, I would have to be ashamed of it.<sup>6</sup>

Such a confession also gives the lie to the glib remark, found on the lips of some ‘believers,’ more one suspects for their own comfort than that of those in danger (if not out of resentment against those who refuse to ‘toe the metaphysical line’), that ‘there are no atheists in a lifeboat.’ There clearly are.

But equally clearly, the horrors of the twentieth century have not caused all to abandon belief in God. Is this just because of some perverse stubbornness on the part of believers? Is it because, without God, the distinction traditionally drawn between good and evil simply collapses – a position Nietzsche felt obliged to endorse, I think – and humanity, by and large, finds it emotionally unbearable to live with such a consequence of the ‘death of God’? Is, then, the refusal to abandon belief in God perhaps motivated by a fear of living in a world without God and, by extension, without order or meaning or value or sense or point? If so, this might be a sign that the belief of the ancient Epicureans, that fear first created the gods, is still alive and well.

However, rather than attempting to gauge how fearful our contemporaries may or may not be of living in a godless, senseless world, it is perhaps of more interest to ask why God now seems to be in some eclipse, to use Martin Buber’s term, and to speculate on how access to God might be regained, if that’s not regarded as too ambitious, even too hubristic, a project!

*Suggested reason for the retreat of faith in God: is Christianity itself responsible?*

Franz Overbeck (1837-1905), the radically sceptical German theologian, who was Professor of New Testament and Early Church History in Basel for just over a quarter of a century from 1870 onwards, believed that Christianity was in effect the author of its own eventual demise. The reasons for this, in Overbeck’s view, didn’t just have to do, as one might first suspect, with the modern clash between religion and science or between religion and historical research into the emergence and development of the Christian religion. No, what Overbeck had mainly in mind, apart from such considerations, was a specifically Christian problem. And it had to do with the fact that Christianity had sought to promote belief in a God of love.

In Overbeck’s judgement, the evidence of history simply gave the lie to any such claim, in the sense that, in the long run, the terror and horror of human history proved to be too strong, too overwhelming, too unrelenting for any belief in a God of love to survive. Paradoxically, Christianity’s teaching on the love of God undermined theism, in Overbeck’s view, and led the world eventually to atheism.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, the French poet and thinker, Paul Valéry, concurs with the notion that it was Christianity that first associated the word love with the name of God.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 117f.

<sup>7</sup> See F. Overbeck, *Christentum und Kultur*, ed. Carl Albrecht Bernoulli (Darmstadt: WBG, 1963; originally published 1919), 30-31; see also the relevant passage in the new critical edition of this work, Franz Overbeck, *Werke und Nachlass*. Band 6/1: Kirchenlexicon. Materialien. »Christentum und Kultur«, ed. Barbara von Reibnitz (Stuttgart/Weimar: Metzler, 1996), 63-64.

<sup>8</sup> ‘Le mot Amour ne s’est trouvé associé au nom de Dieu que depuis le Christ,’ quoted by Agathe Valéry in the ‘Introduction biographique’ of the Bibliothèque de la Pléiade ed. of P. Valéry’s works (vol. I, 72), as mentioned in the notes to Julien Green, ‘Journal’ in *Œuvres Complètes*, vol. IV (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 1680, n. 3 to page 859. Although Valéry did not know Overbeck’s writings, as far as I’m aware,

Overbeck's almost Gnostic sense of a fallen world, or more exactly, of a world that is in itself, as such, fallen—in short, the view that 'creation' and 'fall' coincide—is in the long run clearly incompatible with any acceptance of God, the creator, as being also a God of love. But this is, of course, precisely what Christianity asserts about God, namely that God is the creator and that God is love. And it's for this reason that, as early as the second century, the Christian church resisted the views of Marcion, who taught that there were two gods, one a creator god, the *demiurge*, who made the world with all its woes, and a god of love whom Jesus came to reveal:

Marcion stressed the radical nature of Christianity *vis-à-vis* Judaism. In his theology there existed a total discontinuity between the OT and the NT, between Israel and the church, and even between the god of the OT and the Father of Jesus. Jesus came to reveal the true God, who was totally unknown up to the Incarnation. The god of the OT, the *demiurge*, an inferior being who created the material world and ruled over it, was not exactly an evil being, but he was not good in the same sense as the God and Father of Jesus, a God of love and grace.<sup>9</sup>

In Overbeck's view, the Old Testament was more astute than the New Testament, and did not define God as 'love.'<sup>10</sup> And thus, the Old Testament never gave the same hostage to fortune that the New Testament did in defining God as love. It is interesting to note, in this regard, that when, in the Old Testament, God does announce his name, during the scene at the burning bush with Moses (Ex 3: 13-15), he doesn't actually give himself a name at all, but remains in a sense anonymous. In saying only: 'I am who I am' or 'I am who am,' the God of the Old Testament thereby conceals his identity behind a veil of mystery, refusing to reveal his identity. The divine name uttered at the burning bush, therefore, turns out to be a kind of tautology: 'God is God,' which does not seem very informative, but it does leave the question of God's nature still open.

*Are the New Testament and Old Testament views of God really fundamentally different?*

Yet the difference between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament can be exaggerated. Early Christians certainly were convinced they had taken over the view of God to be found in the Jewish scriptures they had inherited, which we call the Old Testament. And both Judaism and Christianity had in fact a radically different view of divinity from that to be found in the Hellenistic world of the time.

It is natural and obvious for us now, I think, to conceive of God in terms of his transcendent existence in the first instance, and only subsequently to try to understand God's nature and how God and the world may be related. And yet it is actually far from obvious that this Christian (and Jewish) view of God should have become established as it did. For it was by no means the prevailing view of divinity held by the intellectually sophisticated Hellenistic world into which Christianity moved in its early years.

Against this background, it is useful to bear in mind, as Richard Tarnas notes, 'a valuable point . . . recounted by W. K. C. Guthrie: ". . . *theos*, the Greek word which we have in mind when we speak of Plato's god, has primarily a predicative force. That is to say, the Greeks did not, as Christians and Jews do, first assert

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his judgements on theology are also quite similar to Overbeck's: see M. Henry, 'Franz Overbeck: A Review of Recent Literature (Part 1),' *Irish Theological Quarterly* 72 (2007) 402-403.

<sup>9</sup> W. Ward Gasque, art. MARCION, in J. D. Douglas et al. (eds.), *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1974), 629-630, at 629.

<sup>10</sup> For a relevant characterization of the God of the Old Testament in Overbeck's writings, see *Christentum und Kultur*, 266.

the existence of God and then proceed to enumerate his attributes, saying ‘God is good,’ ‘God is love’ and so forth. Rather they were so impressed or awed by the things in life or nature remarkable either for joy or fear that they said ‘this is a god’ or ‘that is a god.’ The Christian says ‘God is love,’ the Greek ‘Love is *theos*,’ or ‘a god.’”<sup>11</sup>

This is perhaps a rather tricky point to grasp, because we are, I imagine, so used to thinking otherwise about ‘God.’ But the Christian viewpoint, taken over from Judaism, turns on the acceptance of a radical distinction between God and the world, whereas for the Greek or Hellenistic mind, reality did not have such a fundamental division. In the Greek vision of the cosmos, there was a unity between the world of the divine and the world of man. Everything – gods and the world of human beings, albeit all with their own specific nature – was part of a seamless system, ruled over implacably by Fate (*moira*).

Hence, if I’ve grasped this difference correctly between the biblical and the Hellenistic view of reality, divinity did not have ultimate responsibility for the world, or couldn’t, as it were, be blamed if things went wrong in the world, whereas for Jews and Christians, the buck stopped always with God. This makes the religion of Jews and Christians potentially much more existentially anguished than the superficially sunnier religion of the Greeks.

#### *Signs of how traditional Christianity and its view of God may be changing*

Perhaps the fading of traditional Christianity in so many parts of the Western world explains why a characteristic Christian attitude – one of profound seriousness about life and its purpose – is now less visible or palpable in modern Western society. Admittedly, this is a very subjective impression on my part, which might not carry much objective weight and could be easily challenged. But for what it is worth, I could offer as examples of the traditional attitude I’m referring to, a figure like the nineteenth-century Anglican Archbishop of Dublin, Richard Whately (1787-1863), who said that the question of human happiness is ‘no laughing matter.’ Or more deeply ingrained is the notion that Jesus never laughed, but is usually portrayed seriously, if not solemnly, in Western art. Or you could think of the lack of humour that marks the deep seriousness of the writings of the Spanish philosopher, of an undoubtedly Catholic background, for all his scepticism, Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936). Now, of course, someone might immediately object that there is plenty of laughter and plenty of smiles in the angels and saints depicted in baroque or rococo art. But, I think, as a general rule, Christianity hasn’t historically been known for any excessive sense of humour or lightness of touch. Whereas smiling Buddhas apparently abound.

And what I just described as the fading of Christianity could be seen, then, in the way attitudes traditionally *not* associated with the Christian faith begin in more recent times to make their appearance in the Western world. Thus the American journalist, H. L. Mencken (1880-1956), defined the creator as: ‘A comedian whose audience is afraid to laugh.’<sup>12</sup> Or the English mathematician and process philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947), noted that, ‘The total absence of humor from the Bible is one of the most singular things in all literature.’<sup>13</sup> Or the Romanian writer, Émile Cioran (1911-1995), claimed that ‘religions, like the ideologies that have inherited their vices, are just so many crusades against humour.’<sup>14</sup>

#### *Assessment of modern changes in religious sensibilities*

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<sup>11</sup> Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind* (London: Pimlico, 1996), 470.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Joan Konner (ed.), *The Atheist’s Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 110.

<sup>13</sup> Alfred North Whitehead [1861-1947], quoted in Joan Konner (ed.), *The Atheist’s Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 113.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Les religions, comme les idéologies qui en ont hérité les vices, se réduisent à des croisades contre l’humour,’ *Aveux et anathèmes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987), 22.

Yet the attempts to take a more light-hearted, happier attitude to religion and to God don't quite ring true. It does still seem inappropriate to respond to human suffering by laughter, and even beneath the surface of Samuel Beckett's well-known line: 'there's nothing funnier than unhappiness,' there is surely a suppressed sense of outrage and sadness. And suffering does seem to be the deepest experience of which human beings are capable. In a letter to Laurence Housman (1865-1959), a younger brother of the poet A. E. Housman, of February-March 1898, Oscar Wilde wrote, 'I quite hold with you on all you say about the relation of human suffering to art; as art is the most intense mode of expression, so suffering is the most real mode of life, the one for which we are all ultimately created.'<sup>15</sup> Earlier in the nineteenth century, in his work, *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, Goethe had said of Christianity that it had revealed to mankind 'the divine depth of suffering ['die göttliche Tiefe des Leidens']'.<sup>16</sup>

In that sense, the short poem by the Australian poet, Les Murray (b. 1938), seems somehow truer to the human condition than the humorous one-liners of wisecrackers. In his short poem, *The Knockdown Question*, for example, a poem that also hints at the more-than-human dimensions of the problem of suffering and of any possible 'solution' to it, Les Murray takes up the question I identified earlier, uncontroversially I hope, as the one that lies close to the heart of modern atheism, and thus close to the heart of belief too:

Why does God not spare the innocent?

The answer to that is not in  
the same world as the question  
so you would shrink from me  
in terror if I could answer it.<sup>17</sup>

### Conclusion

So, to take up Overbeck's point again about the ultimate consequences of Christianity's description of God as love—was, and is, Christianity reckless in defining God as love? Would it not be better for Christianity to hedge its bets, so to speak, and not try to reveal too much about God's nature or identity? Would it not be safer for Christianity to stress simply the unknowability of God (as in the Prologue to John's Gospel: 'No one has ever seen God' [Jn 1: 18]), without going into any further detail?

Maybe so, but surely just to say nothing about God, to retreat to a position of describing God as G. Chr. Lichtenberg (1742-1799) somewhat sardonically did, as simply 'personified incomprehensibility',<sup>18</sup> is hardly an adequate response to the need to present a credible God. Such a strategy may mean that no existential or intellectual hostages are given to fortune. But at what cost? A God, who is only a vast abstraction, will soon cease to be a God at all. There has to be some real connection between divinity and humanity. Otherwise, divinity becomes meaningless and hence irrelevant to human existence. To take up again the main theme of this talk, Christianity has privileged the reality of love as being where that connection is most vitally and least compromisingly to be located. And it does so in full recognition of the risks involved.

However, from the point of view of Catholic theology, at any rate, to describe God as love cannot be done without also taking into account the analogical nature of all language relating to God. Human language –

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<sup>15</sup> In *More Letters of Oscar Wilde*, edited by Rupert Hart-Davis, (Oxford: OUP, 1987), 167.

<sup>16</sup> Quoted in K. Löwith, *Von Hegel zu Nietzsche* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1978), 37.

<sup>17</sup> From *Poems the Size of Photographs* (Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove, 2002), 67.

<sup>18</sup> 'After all, is our idea of God anything more than personified incomprehensibility?' (*The Reflections of Lichtenberg*, trans. Norman Alliston, 87, quoted in *A Dictionary of Philosophical Quotations*, ed. A. J. Ayer and Jane O'Grady [Oxford: Blackwell, 1994], 256).

and what other language have we? – cannot be applied univocally to God. We can see this more clearly perhaps from the example of another word often applied to God: the word ‘power,’ as in *The Magnificat*: ‘The Almighty works marvels for me. Holy his name.’ If we think of Lord Acton’s dictum: ‘Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,’ we might well be inclined to ask, with the Canadian journalist, George Daacon: ‘Where does that leave God?’<sup>19</sup> Is God absolutely corrupt?

Clearly, if that were the case, Christianity would no longer be a credible religion. The reality of such a religion’s corrupt god might have to be acknowledged, were there incontrovertible evidence of his existence, but such a god could hardly be described as ‘love.’ Nor could he be adored or loved by human beings. The idea of analogy, however, offers a possible way out of this dilemma. For it acknowledges that, in any comparison of human and divine attributes, dissimilarity is believed to outweigh any similarity. To ignore the importance of this claim, however difficult it may be to accept the claim itself, is surely fatal.

Of course there is a recurrent temptation, as Piers Paul Read has put it, ‘to forget that we are made in [God’s] image and likeness, not God in ours.’<sup>20</sup> In other words, we forget that there is no compellingly clear, direct intellectual or imaginative route from us to God. Immanuel Kant reiterated this point perhaps most influentially in modern times. But long before Kant, the entire scriptural witness teaches that God’s ways are not our ways, that God transcends human understanding. Thus, while there has to be some recognizable point of contact between God and us for religion to be possible, at the same time it is foolhardy to take terms familiar to us from everyday experience, such as ‘love’ or ‘power,’ and apply them directly, without any modification or qualification, to God.

There is, however, a price to be paid for accepting the analogical nature of the language of theology. For to claim that ‘God is love,’ and to acknowledge that to do so is to speak about God analogically, means also conceding that what ‘love’ is for us, may not be what ‘love’ is for God. And hence what appears incompatible with ‘love’ for us, may not be so in God’s eyes. This is, admittedly, a risky assertion, one that could easily be misunderstood. It could suggest that God is entirely arbitrary—a dangerous idea, though one that is not without its defenders in Christian tradition, and indeed not without a foothold in the Bible itself. The image, for instance, of the difference between the ‘pot’ and the ‘potter,’ found in the prophet Isaiah and echoed by St Paul,<sup>21</sup> highlights the gulf that, for scripture, lies between God and humanity, or between the supernatural and the natural, to use language now frequently regarded as suspect. For, as Piers Paul Read noted in an essay on St Margaret Clitherow: ‘The supernatural does sometimes seem unnatural.’<sup>22</sup>

It is the gulf between the divine and the human, excluding as it seems to do the validity of all humanly contrived solutions to the problem of suffering, that perhaps more than anything else brings the intractable nature of Christian theology’s fundamental problem into sharp focus. How, to state the problem directly, is one to understand a God who out of love could have created such a world as ours, complete with its ‘intolerable shirt of flame/Which human power cannot remove’?<sup>23</sup> To this question there appears to be no intellectual answer either in the Old Testament or in the New. The Book of Job, for example, whatever else it may be, is not a work that provides a credible answer to the problem of innocent human suffering. Far from it.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in Joan Konner (ed.), *The Atheist’s Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 57.

<sup>20</sup> Piers Paul Read, *Hell and Other Destinations* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006), 60 (in a chapter entitled ‘Upon this Rock’).

<sup>21</sup> See Is 29: 16 and Is 45: 9; and Rom 9: 20.

<sup>22</sup> Piers Paul Read, *Hell and Other Destinations*, 238.

<sup>23</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Little Gidding IV’ (the fourth of *The Four Quartets*).

<sup>24</sup> In a letter to Lady Robert Cecil, dated 12 November 1922, Virginia Woolf wrote, ‘I read the Book of Job last night – I don’t think God comes well out of it’ (<http://www.hielema.ca/essays/job.html>).

Nor does the New Testament offer any intellectually sustainable answer to this problem. What it does offer is the story of how God in Christ, out of love, took the experience of innocent suffering into his own life and went beyond it. And the crucified Christ is, for Christian faith, the only unambiguous icon of the living God. As the English critic, Terry Eagleton, has written: ‘The only authentic image of this violently loving God [of Christianity] is a tortured and executed political criminal, who dies in an act of solidarity with what the Bible calls the *anawim*, meaning the destitute and dispossessed.’<sup>25</sup> The scandal of the cross, to use St Paul’s famous expression, not surprisingly continues to scandalize right down to our own day, and continues to be rejected as scandalous by those who find Christianity a bloodthirsty and even a sadistic or masochistic religion.

But, in purely intellectual terms (if there be such), for Catholic theology at least, the question of the ‘why’ of a suffering creation sponsored by a loving God becomes potentially less disconcerting if we accept that the term ‘love’ cannot be applied univocally or unequivocally to God—in other words, if we accept the reliability of the principle of analogy in speaking about God. Just as we cannot see the goodness of creation in any unalloyed sense – Genesis portrays God alone as enjoying that prerogative – so we cannot see the meaning of divine love with the eyes of the flesh, but only with the eyes of faith, as Aquinas says the Apostles ‘saw’ the risen Christ with the eyes of faith.

‘Whoever believes in God’s presence in the world,’ writes Leszek Kolakowski, ‘has to admit that empirically His presence is ambiguous. Clearly, there would be no need of faith if the course of world affairs followed directly and unmistakably the norms of justice; this would mean that we live in Paradise. . . . Life in exile is bound to be ambiguous, God’s signs are never clear, trusting Him is inevitably to defy the limits of natural knowledge.’<sup>26</sup>

What makes such trust inevitable is the ambiguous nature of our own human condition, where light and dark are always conjoined in that ‘uneasy inseparability,’<sup>27</sup> so appositely expressed by Racine in *Phèdre*’s paradoxical description of her incestuous love for Hippolyte as ‘une flamme si noire.’ It is a question, not so much of the ‘dark night,’ as of the ‘dark light’ of human loves, emerging from the ‘heart of darkness’ but striving to connect with the ultimate love Christianity identifies as God. The suffering of life can give us some inkling about what that divine love must be, if God was willing to take such a risk, involving such pain and anguish, in creating this world where there is not just occasional ecstasy, but wholesale agony. However, if God can ‘justify’ his risk, and ‘redeem’ his creation – and Christian faith believes he can, indeed that he has – then, that can only be if he is also beyond creation and hence beyond human understanding—except analogically, for what that’s worth. In that sense, God can give the peace that surpasses all understanding, but only because he is the giver, not the needy recipient, of redemption.

Yet, for Christian faith – and this is the message that comes across again and again from the mystical tradition – the reality of redemption cannot be attained without suffering, without sacrifice, without, as the gospels say, ‘losing your life in order to find it.’ Hence the significance of death, when, in concrete terms, we lose our life in a definitive way. Thus, to take just one example, from the writings of a saint whose feastday was celebrated this week, St Rose of Lima: ‘The Lord, our Saviour,’ she wrote, ‘raised his voice and spoke with incomparable majesty. “Let all know”, he said, “that after sorrow grace follows; let them understand that without the burden of affliction one cannot arrive at the height of glory; that the measure of heavenly gifts in

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<sup>25</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution. Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 23.

<sup>26</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, *Religion* (Oxford: OUP, 1982), 49.

<sup>27</sup> I owe this marvellous phrase, as also the reference to *Phèdre*, to my friend, John Campbell.

increased in proportion to the labours undertaken. Let them be on their guard against error or deception; this is the only ladder by which paradise is reached; without the cross there is no road to heaven.’<sup>28</sup>

But, for Christianity, heaven is real, and there is a road to get us there, harsh and stony though it may often be. Hence, perhaps the ‘humorists’ — those who intuit a joyful outcome to human destiny — do then, after all, have the last word, beyond the ‘cries and whispers’ of human history. Not for reasons we can understand, still less engineer, but nevertheless in a way that includes and doesn’t turn a blind eye to the reality of human experience, the ‘humorists’ have a theologically correct hunch, I think, that, in the end, to speak with Julian of Norwich (c. 1342-c. 1420): ‘Sin is behovely, but all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well.’

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<sup>28</sup> From the writings of St Rose of Lima, Office of Readings for 23 August, *The Divine Office*, vol. III (London: Collins, 1974), 212\*.