Uncertainty of Faith and the Certainty of Desire

Recently I found myself reading two very different books. The first was a collection of papers by atheists entitled *Philosophers without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*. The second was *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, a sampling of the wisdom acquired by Christians of the third and fourth centuries who had embraced the solitary life in the wilderness. These two works could not have been further apart.

Arguments against belief are hardly recent; and, so far as I can tell, there are no fresh and exciting cases to be made against religion. It takes no skill to poke scientific holes in literalist readings of certain passages of the Bible. The problem of evil—how a God who is both good and all-powerful could possibly allow the suffering of innocent people—has been rehearsed many times. Biblical writers themselves wrestled with this question. Then, too, the absolutist claims of religion not infrequently have led to hostility, divisiveness and war. Yet some of the religious establishment’s fiercest critics come from within the religious traditions themselves. One has only to think of Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah and Amos, or the New Testament prophets John the baptizer and Jesus. Finally, the so-called “proofs” of God’s existence have probably never persuaded non-believers that there is a God. A mind not disposed to entertaining the words of Psalm 8 or Psalm 19 is hardly likely to find the Five Ways of Saint Thomas convincing. Atheism, a rabbi friend remarked, seems to be the condition of people disappointed with God; but, unlike Jacob, they have chosen to flee rather than wrestle.
The desert Christians, on the other hand, enacted a drama quite different. Undertaking a single-minded pursuit of God, they retreated to the barren landscape of the Egyptian desert. They seemed almost aggressive in their desire to behold the face of God, or at least to behold as much of the divine mystery as God would permit them to see. No penance was too great, no wait was too long, no demon too fearsome, no struggle of soul too exhausting. In the process of fasting, praying, and battling demons, they mapped the treacherous movements of the human heart. In the end, their lives testified to (if I might borrow a book title of Belden C. Lane) “the solace of fierce landscapes.” Those Christians, for the most part, were not highly educated; they did not wrestle in the world of ideas as philosophers do. Still, the assaults against faith that they endured strike me as every bit as severe as the philosophical conclusions that cripple the mind’s ability to live with mystery.

**Experiencing what God is not**

I said that it appeared to me, initially, that the world of the thinkers without gods and the world of the desert monks could not be further removed from each other. Yet in one way, at least, those worlds might actually touch. After listening to a talk by one of the contributors to the *Philosophers without Gods* volume, an elderly religious remarked somewhat humorously that, if what the speaker said was an example of atheism, then maybe he was an atheist, too! He was alluding to a facet of religious experience quite familiar to many believers, namely, the “apophatic” or negative moment.

One point the speaker developed concerned how, having been a Catholic from birth, she learned to accustom herself to living in a universe without God. Since philosophy proved unable to deliver persuasive arguments for God’s existence, and
since there was no scientific evidence for a Creator, she reached
the conclusion that God is non-existent and little more than a
crutch for the weak-minded to make it through life. Neverthe-
less, religious sensibilities still anchored her life. And
once she no longer believed in life after death, existence in this
world assumed greater urgency. A sense of gratitude and
wonder over the sheer fact of being alive seemed to be a deep
and sincere part of her spiritual outlook as a non-believer.

That the divine mystery is essentially unknowable has
long been recognized by Christian writers. I think, for example,
of St. Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Moses*, the anonymous
medieval work *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the sermons of the
Dominican spiritual master Meister Eckhart, and the “dark
night” experience of the Carmelite mystic John of the Cross.
The eminent twentieth-century Roman Catholic theologian,
Karl Rahner, would speak of “the incomprehensible mystery of
God.” Christian writers like these came to their recognition of
divine unknowability on the basis of their own religious
experience. The Bible itself realizes that, when it comes to God,
human beings are in the face of the unknown. Alongside the
richly imaginative narratives of Genesis and Exodus, one could
place texts like Isaiah 55:8, where we read: “For my thoughts
are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways.” Or from
Paul: “For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has
been his counselor?” (Romans 11:34)

Moses, we are told, was never allowed to behold God’s
face because “no one shall see me and live” (Exodus 33:20); all
his conversations with God took place under cloud-cover.
“Moses’ vision of God began with light,” wrote Gregory of
Nyssa. “Afterwards God spoke to him in a cloud. But when
Moses rose higher and became more perfect, he saw God in the darkness.”

The prophet Elijah, after witnessing rock-splitting wind, earthquake, fire, and then “sheer silence,” did not even manage to glimpse God from the back, as Moses had. Staring at the silence, Elijah stood at the mouth of the cave and “a voice came to him.” The voice he heard apparently came without sound. Despite the frightening, furious display of nature’s power, after all the special effects, the reader is left frustrated. Waiting for the divine mystery to manifest itself, we feel deflated. Elijah is instructed to leave the mountain and resume his mission; he still does not know what God looks like. Elijah’s story is recounted in 1 Kings 19.

In the apophatic moments of our experience, the accent falls on what we do not know about God. It falls on the limits of our images, concepts, and language as we try to express what God is like or how we have experienced the divine mystery. In this experience, a humble person would not say “I exist” and “God exists” in the same breath. If I exist, then God does not exist; and if God exists, then I do not. The word “exist” does not carry the same meaning in both cases. As Saint Thomas taught, God alone can truly be said “to be.” The same holds true for words like “good,” or “love,” or “life.” Perhaps this accounts for why Jesus responded to the rich man, “No one is good but God alone” (Mark 10:18). God defines what goodness is, just as God is Love. The fourth evangelist, looking deep into his memories of Jesus, would reflect, “In him was life” (John 1:4). Paul may have been making the same point when he wrote, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). How could any human being comprehend what life is before meeting the Word made flesh? The one who
knows Jesus would never say “I have life” and “He has life” in the same breath. Language does not stretch that far.

Rightly understood, then, a believer might claim that the God of human thought does not exist, because whatever human beings say or conceptualize about God necessarily falls far short of the mystery. I think of Augustine searching for God by exploring the corridors of his memory. There he sounds like a man at the limits of understanding and relishing the experience. He asks, in Book 10 of *The Confessions* (from the translation by Garry Wills), “So what, in loving God, do I love? One who is higher than my own soul’s highest point? Then from that part of the soul I must strive up toward him.” The idea of God as the ultimate principle of order in the universe, the ground of all reasonableness, starts to unravel when we are standing at the edge where reasoning ends and mystery begins. When driven only by the demands of rationality and logic, who would not run aground in the effort to think “God”?

Perhaps, then, there is a bit of the atheist in all of us. The mind that prays is likely to learn, over the course of a lifetime, that the God of one’s immaturity does not exist. The closer we come to God, the less we seem to know about him; and yet, at the same time, the more our lives seem to be governed by love. Paul’s words to the Corinthians could easily apply here: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways” (1 Cor 13:11). Paul writes this at the close of his celebrated passage about love.

**Lives chastened by longing**

Yet there is also a trace of the desert in us. One notices about *The Desert Fathers* that, while the book contains frequent references to God, there are comparatively few references to
Christ or Jesus. Perhaps the barrenness of the desert prompted a certain leanness of imagination, although the desert Christians certainly knew the gospels. But did they perhaps pay more attention to the virtues that Jesus exemplified than to the rich narrative imagery that makes his example so memorable? I don’t know. Personally, I would much prefer a fresco by Fra Angelico on the wall of my cell to a windowless cave. But at least this much can be said: the desert Christians went beyond word and image to penetrate the mystery underneath. Their hearts were firmly set on God. At every hour, they were in touch with the soul’s search for God. For many of us, awareness of our spirit’s thirst is often sporadic; theirs, however, was fearsomely constant.

The history of the desert Christians invites us to notice the intensity with which men and women, having removed themselves from “the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things” (Mark 4:19), are capable of attending to the heart’s desire to be one with its Creator. We may not be ready to join them in the wilderness. Nevertheless, we cannot help but admire, and perhaps even envy, their eagerness to choose “the better part” (Luke 10:42). And yet if the desert represents human longing to know our Maker, then this means that each of us carries a piece of the desert inside. The thirst that drives us to keep looking for God is the same thirst that cleanses and purifies the mind by laying bare its limitations.

There is an inescapable uncertainty about faith because, even with revelation, there is much about God that we do not know. “For now,” Paul writes, “we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face” (1 Cor 13:12). At the same time, the longing for communion with God only grows stronger as the
heart matures. The desire sometimes gets unfocused, but over time it steadies the mind. Many discover that no name, no human word, adequately encompasses the divine mystery. Yet there is no leaving the desert, either. Like Moses, we have to be at peace with beholding the promised land from afar. As Origen wrote in the third century, “It is better for the one who is seeking the perfect life to die along the way than never to have started on the search for perfection.”

The climate of faith and the culture of life

The Church teaches that the right to life brings with it a right to all the elements that are necessary for sustaining and nurturing life. These obviously include basic physical necessities like food, housing, safe environment, and health care, as well as goods like education, political and social stability, and humane working conditions. We do not live on bread alone, however. What is indispensable for nurturing human life is “every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut 8:3). Societies and cultures in which the air is spiritually thin are unfriendly to life. The right to life entails the right to a social environment that supports spiritual growth. If nonbelief should pervade an entire culture, its members would eventually suffocate. While I am not prepared to argue for a correlation between atheism and the breaking down of family life, I understand when a young person finds it hard to continue believing in God’s love because their home has fallen apart.

Religious men and women make a major contribution to keeping the atmosphere of the surrounding culture breathable. They talk about God. They live by faith. Their lives incarnate key gospel values of service, humility, compassion, and love. Religious lives give prophetic expression to Jesus’ oneness with his people, especially the poor. He lived with them, and he
suffered with them. At the same time, in a world where educated people reason their way out of belief, religious people understand, on the basis of their own experience, the darkness that almost always settles over faith, sometimes lasting for years. Even Mother Teresa endured this profound desolation, as we learn from her recently published private writings (Mother Teresa: Come Be My Light). Still, in societies where “the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things” (Mark 4:19) choke the soul, religious lives are deeply counter-cultural. They demonstrate that a thirsting heart will never be satisfied so long as the human being chooses to walk among rocks and thorns. Lives that are passionately and unequivocally God-centered can be as electrifying today as the desert Christians were centuries ago. They angle our vision toward the heavens. Yet this electricity will go nowhere unless people are made conscious of the desert that surrounds them.

**Two poles, two tensions**

I am left, then, with an image of the religious person as someone standing between two poles. One pole is the uncertainty of faith. Through the force of this pole, the religious person should be the first to understand why men and women might slide into atheism. Someone who has never faced the dark night would probably have little to contribute in a conversation with non-believers.

The other pole is the soul’s longing. It longs for union with its Creator, and it longs for communion with other women and men. Not a superficial communion; not a communion that is more ideological than concrete. Not a romantic communion with humanity in the abstract, but a communion with the other flawed human beings whom we meet and live with from one day to the next. Together these two poles—the uncertainty of
faith and the certainty of desire—generate a lifegiving tension in the soul of religious people. The presence of such people among us helps to keep our culture from caving in on itself.

This first tension gives rise to a second. An awareness of mystery without a corresponding sense of mission would not be faithful to the gospel. Jesus, after all, did not withdraw from the world; he engaged it. But a sense of mission or purpose, unprotected by an awareness of mystery, is bound to become disoriented. Apostles sometimes lose their vision; and when this happens, they reap exhaustion. Apostles have learned, often the hard way, that their energy and effort cannot be sustained apart from contact with God. The hard-working atheist may work tirelessly on behalf of others; but in the end, how does the vision sustain itself? On the other hand, the friends of God have also learned that being absorbed by God to the extent of not noticing the neighbor outside their gate opens the way to deception. “God,” in this case, gets corralled. What remains is the not-God that atheists reject.

Religious men and women are familiar with these tensions. The Spirit has prepared them to listen sympathetically to the non-believer who struggles with mystery and then gives up. The Spirit has also prepared them, however, to accompany the God-seeker by peeling away the layers of distractions culture has placed over us, thereby laying bare the desert beneath. Once in the desert, people may again experience the thirst that can draw them to life. A culture of life requires a culture of faith. Religious women and men have been given an essential role to play in the creation of such a culture as guides, mentors, and soul friends. They know a lot about landscapes with God and landscapes without God. Their presence is a
sacramental reminder of the journey that every human being is invited to make.

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