

A DARK GOD

By ROSS COLLINGS

AS A MONK OF THE EGYPTIAN DESERT peacefully remarked about selling his codex of the gospels to feed the poor, 'I have only sold the word which commands me to sell all and give to the poor'.¹ To live without the letters of the New Law was to fulfil that law in letter and spirit.

Every person coming to God must in some way undergo that law of dispossession. What embellishes the monk's example of charity is not just stoic patience and equanimity in the face of loss, nor merely detachment from material things for the primacy of the spirit; most of all it is that he entered into the meaning of the holy precisely in the experience of deprivation, and a deprivation not of 'worldly' goods but of the very spiritual good things that had taught him to recognize the holy. To say that he lost the scriptures is to miss the point. In being dispossessed of them, he 'realized'—made actual in his own existence—their meaning.

In this time of the most enormous and rapid changes in human culture the spiritual life of most people is marked to a significant degree by that experience of being dispossessed of traditional religious forms. The loss may not be material—the holy texts are still extant and the holy places standing—but the shifts and currents of sensibility mean that these things may not be effective as they once were in mediating the experience of God. The apophatic, 'non-appearing', tradition of spirituality can help to interpret this phenomenon.

It reaches back to the beginnings of the Church. When Paul announced in the Areopagus that he had a word concerning One venerated there as 'an unknown god' he seemed to find fertile ground in the minds of the Athenian crowd—cf Acts 17:16–34. The promise of a divine Unknown was in some way familiar but still deeply fascinating. To revere God as transcending the whole of creation, as one who cannot be contained in any religious shrine or custom, who is unlike every form of human art or thought; that from this transcendence he is the creative source of all being, life and meaning and is not merely the goal, but the dynamic source of the human reach for the divine—all of this would resonate sympathetically with their more sublime Hellenistic religious perceptions. Among the many shrines to the many gods Paul's words thus far could be heard not as an affront

to local pieties but as the transcendent philosophical meaning towards which they all pointed.

It all broke down when he began to speak about this God raising a man from the dead. What a pity, after such a fine beginning, to lapse into a credulous wonder-story! One of the few exceptions to the general scorn and disbelief was one called Dionysius the Areopagite. Given the impressive doctrine of divine transcendence in Paul's homily, we can see why one of the greatest writers of the whole mystical tradition, probably a Syrian of the early sixth century, might assume that name and, under it, develop the apophatic doctrine of mystical theology as a 'ray of divine darkness'.² However, what distinguished the Athenian Dionysius was not his sensitivity to divine transcendence—that was happily accepted by the whole crowd—but his recognizing that God might, from his transcendence, be free to enter so immediately into the fabric of this world. For most of the others that would seem to cancel the very transcendence that was God's glory—with the added indignity that such an intervention is so flagrantly eccentric to the natural law of human mortality and so scandalously identified with one individual in all the limitation of his one particular culture. Surely the unknown God would be the more authentically God the more he remains unknown. The Jews themselves had seemed increasingly to respect that total otherness of God; the more they reflected about God, the more reluctant they became even to utter his name. His glory was shielded behind his Law.

That the reality of God is beyond all finite being and that therefore real knowledge of God must in some way transcend all conceptual thought is a strong conviction in the religious life of many today. It is part of the primal instinct of awe in the face of the mystery of the origin and destiny of human existence, a wonder which is the soul of every religion and as such is an immense blessing. But it can also be experienced as a source of disequilibrium. In our modern world it can precipitate a typical failure of nerve with regard to particular forms of religious belief, for often enough religious awakening is an irruption of the holy in a way quite independent of traditional doctrines and forms of worship. Indeed, it will call into question the very nature of doctrine. The admonition of Augustine will resonate with new compelling truth: *Si comprehendis non est Deus*—if you have grasped it, it is not God. What, then, if the holding of intellectual belief has been assumed to be precisely a 'holding', a grasp of truth? Then the new grace may be understood as a liberation from the shackles of doctrine, from the habitual defining and confining knowledge of the community, and as a summons to a blessed

dispossession of intellectual baggage for the sake of the apophatic pearl of great price.

One kind of answer to this summons lies in turning to 'mysticism' and rejecting doctrine—or 'dogma' as it might then be called, with some opprobrium—although 'mysticism' is usually far too religious a word to be claimed by those who take this option. 'Faith' here lies in fidelity to the ever greater mystery of the holy—in religious terms—or to the good and the true, a constant orientation towards the formless One which requires the spiritual pilgrim to renounce the comfort of pitching his tent in any oasis of familiar religious tradition. The experience of the mystery of grace, because it is an advent, something that comes upon us, invites us to live from what is quite beyond our own potentialities, beyond our own control. Such a surrender is known instinctively to be the authenticating mark of religious existence. Of course, all the great religious traditions can be seen to bear witness to this abnegation—Buddhist and Hindu wisdom immediately comes to mind, but also the great Christian mystics who, like St Gregory of Nyssa, 'leave behind everything that can be observed' and enter into 'the true knowledge of what is sought, . . . the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness'.³ But if mystical doctrine is thus invoked, it can only be in such a way as to deny itself for the ever greater experiential mystery. It is then that the fascinating darkness of God in his transcendence is likely to take on the further bleak shadow of loneliness. As R. S. Thomas says to the God of his 'Shadows':

I close my eyes.
The darkness implies your presence,
the shadow of your steep mind
on my world. I shiver in it.⁴

For doctrine, and liturgy in which it is embodied, is that by which a community expresses and shares its meaning and in which an individual finds himself to be part of a communion of life. To make a radical choice for the apophatic over against the particularity of an intellectual and embodied tradition is not in fact to join a communion of *philosophia perennis mystica*, but in principle to choose spiritual isolation—*monos pros Monon*, alone to the Alone, as Plotinus declared,⁵ with the deep pathos that marked the classical religious world, which is not uncommon in modern individualistic religious sensibility.

Most Christians do not make such a radical option against doctrine. Even so, for many there is a more or less implicit erosion of trust that

doctrine ultimately has any real connection with the existential knowledge of the nameless mystery. Whether that perception of the holy has come as an invasion of the spirit in a 'big' experience, or whether it is a constant whisper from the dark region always just beyond the confines of one's experience, it often seems to subvert the realism of conceptual religious knowledge and traditional imagery. The result can be a kind of modern spiritual Docetism: the 'real' knowledge of God lies only in the non-conceptual sense of the holy, while credal beliefs and liturgical forms of worship are assumed to be mythic, idealized or theoretic projections which belong merely to the cultural sphere of religion. They are not denied, but their truth is simply human and contingent. Far from being an absolute of faith, they become just another part of the myriad relative forms of religious history. All this may not be clearly and distinctly affirmed; indeed, it is all the more problematic if it is only implicit and darkly suspected, for then the blessed darkness of the holy 'beyond' is again shot through with a more oppressive shadow. Pure surrender into divine unknowing, which has its own kind of existential certainty, becomes vitiated by doubt about the ultimate truth of still-professed beliefs.

The apophatic tradition indeed has much to say concerning this spiritual condition. Not, however, by endorsing the demise of doctrine nor by reducing the human dimensions of faith to a provisional means of attaining pure formless spirit. In fact, the very opposite is the case. The Egyptian monk's surrender of his book for God's sake did not show that the role of the scriptures in his life was mere transient appearance; rather, the scriptures themselves show how his willing dispossession of them only appeared to be loss. Just so, the apophatic tradition does not merely assert darkness but interprets it. The phenomena of spiritual dislocation, emptiness and aridity are not absurd, but can be made to disclose their own immanent meaning.

Consider firstly the foundational experience of sheer need for God, the wish, hope or desire for One who seems to be absent. It is born out of the experience of the radical incompleteness of human existence, of the limitation, failure, transience of even the best of human gifts and endeavours—what the Wisdom tradition of the Bible calls, with various tones of pathos, anger or dismay, its vanity or futility. One of the great humane atheists of our age bears poignant witness to that need:

What Spinoza calls 'the intellectual love of God' has seemed to me the best thing to live by, but I have not had even the somewhat abstract God that Spinoza allowed himself to whom to attach my intellectual love. I have loved a ghost, and in loving a ghost my inmost self has itself

become spectral. I have therefore buried it deeper and deeper beneath layers of cheerfulness, affection, and joy of life. But my most profound feelings have remained always solitary and have found in human things no companionship. The sea, the stars, the night wind in waste places, mean more to me than even the human beings I love best, and I am conscious that human affection is to me at bottom an attempt to escape from the vain search for God.⁶

Though Bertrand Russell judged the search to be vain, yet the need is terribly real and his seems to be a fair expression in experiential terms of the classical theological understanding of human being as *capax Dei*, 'the poor, questioning and in itself empty orientation towards the abiding mystery whom we call God'.⁷

Even more strikingly, Russell's experience is not entirely remote from the desolate longing of the mystics. Their language is constantly that of searching, hungering, thirsting, aching, dying for God. Unlike Russell, they do not try to escape the search and their entering into it in the form of loving faith is itself an affirmation of the reality of God. But at the same time it is clear that such faith, while in a real sense being a life-fulfilling answer to the 'empty orientation' which is human existence, is not the kind of answer that simply dispels the question. Faith does not assuage the experiential need for God—indeed, it increases it—but it vindicates it by transforming the sheer empty capaciousness, what would otherwise indeed be futile, into the form of loving. It does not dissolve the mystery but enters into it all the more profoundly precisely as mystery. Thus, St John of the Cross:

For this reason Isaiah, speaking with God, said, 'Truly you are a hidden God' (Isai 45:15). . . . God is hidden from the soul and therefore it is always right that the soul should regard him as hidden and should seek him as one hidden, saying, 'Where have you hidden yourself?' (*Cant* 1:3).

John consistently points out the connection between the contemplative quest for God and the natural divine potential of human existence. His account of that natural potential is usually in the positive language of God's 'substantial presence' or 'union' (*Asc* II,5,3), or of the human person as the dwelling-place or temple of God: 'Oh soul, most beautiful of all creatures, . . . you yourself are his dwelling and his secret chamber and hiding place' (*Cant* 1:7). But the truth thus expressed so positively is in fact realized experientially in the negative form of need (unfulfilled), desire (not possessing), question (uncomprehending) and John reiterates

time and again that this is a most authentic experiential form of human existence and of its graced transformation as spiritual growth. 'There is but one thing to be remembered—that although he is within you, he is hidden' (*Cant* 1:8). So often it is assumed that the painful sense of the opaqueness of human existence, the baffling 'why?' in the face of human suffering, failure, folly and malice, all amount to a failure of faith. John indicates how that question may be the very form of faith.

None of this is to deny the reality and value of particular experiences of grace in a person's life in which the presence of the living God is perceived with a certain immediacy—'. . . not only learning but also experiencing the divine things'.⁸ John's own life was immensely blessed with such mystical graces, but that makes even more telling his relentless counsel to reach out, by an orientation of dark faith, beyond the limits even of these—'denying' and 'forgetting' them, as he puts it in his more zestful terms of mystical asceticism.

Every sight that the soul has of the Beloved through knowledge or feeling or any other communication (which are like messengers bringing her news of who he is), increases and awakens the desire still more (as crumbs would in great hunger), making her grieve at being put off with so little. And so she says: 'Surrender yourself now completely'. (*Cant* 6:4)

This is clearly not a denial of the genuineness of spiritual gifts but a faithful response to what they mean—a summons towards the Giver rather than resting in his gift, towards the *Deus semper maior*, God always greater, of the Ignatian motto.

We have here a very wholesome critique of the notion of spiritual experience. If it is truly spiritual then it is about loving, and love means being willingly surrendered into the life of the beloved rather than centring oneself in the gifts, even the best, genuinely 'divine' gifts, which are now part of one's own existence. So the dynamism of transcending every experience of grace by heading into the dark region of unknowing beyond it, is in fact self-transcendence; and that, not as a spiritual achievement or technique, but as self-emptying, self-dispossession, into another. 'It must be known that the soul lives where it loves rather than in the body which it animates; . . . it gives life to the body, but lives through love in the one whom it loves' (*Cant* 8:3). It is only the pretended grasp (*aprehension*) of the things of God which is renounced, all in favour of being grasped by him.

The role of intellectual belief is also best understood in this context. In the twelfth stanza of his *Spiritual canticle* John addresses faith itself:

O crystalline fountain,
 If on this your silvered surface
 You would suddenly form
 The beloved eyes
 Which I hold outlined in my depths!

He interprets this silvered surface as being 'the propositions and articles' of belief; and, shifting the image from that of fountain to chalice, 'the truths and substance they contain in themselves' are as underlying gold. Doctrinal belief, then, is not to be discarded in favour of an expanding non-conceptual sense of mystery. Whilst the verbal form is in some sense a veiling or concealment, it is also the expression and mediation of the hidden, golden reality of God's self-giving. 'So faith gives and communicates to us God himself; although covered with the silver of faith, it does not fail to give him to us in truth' (*Cant* 12:4). To receive and assert doctrine in a doctrinaire, ideological mode is to betray its very meaning, which is that human words are sacramental of the Word. To hear, affirm and speak those words of faith authentically is the outwardness and visibility (or audibility) of submitting to the hidden, silent Word.

John of the Cross holds Jesus Christ to be the measure, realization and indeed the immanent form of every experience of grace. Viewed from the outside that might seem to be at least paradoxical, if not contradictory and absurd, for surely the very nature of the 'non-appearing' experience is its formlessness? How can prayer be intrinsically Christian, Christ-formed, if it has no clear conceptual content, if there is no distinct focus of sensuous imagination, if all 'meditation, as when we imagine Christ crucified or bound at the column . . . must be cast out from the soul, which will remain in darkness so as to attain to divine union' (*Asc* II, 12, 3)? The one who prays thus may otherwise hold to Christian belief, but the prayer itself, a still, quiet, peaceful attentiveness towards an unseen God (the 'active night of spirit'), would seem to transcend the particularity of Christ. Or, if this mode of prayer seems uncommonly pure and empty, what of the more tawdry experience of 'trying but failing to pray' through discursive meditation or reading of scripture or simple speaking to God—none of it now delivering any sense of meaningful encounter? The more one tries to force it, the more it seems to deliver only 'aridity, distaste and stress' (*DN* I, 8, 3). This is an experience which John suggests may well be the occasion for discerning the new mode of dark contemplative faith,⁹ but at the same time it is not just something to be escaped. Although it feels as though what should be living forms of Christian faith have become hollow shells, that very difficulty and failure may itself be a mode of the grace of Christ.

This totally christological principle of the spiritual life has its own inner luminosity, and John approaches it in several ways. Firstly, the phenomenon of emptiness or desolation is never, in the context of needing God, just an indeterminate, neutral 'space'. It only occurs as an exigence for relationship. From the outset the religious quest has been for God as he has made himself known, 'spoken' himself in his Word by 'wounding' the person with desire for him, and so the beloved of the soul is 'the Word, the Son of God' (*Cant* 1:2). Therefore any deprivation of perceiving him is not a dissolution of the form of Christ, but the 'negative form' of that love, still formed by the beloved.

'Behold, the affliction of love is not cured except by your presence and your form.' . . . The soul feels herself to have the outline of love, which is the affliction she here speaks of, desiring that it may be perfectly formed by the Form of which it is the outline, which is her husband, the Word, the Son of God who, as St Paul says, is the brightness of his glory and the form of his substance. (*Cant* 11:12)

This of course is primarily true of the experience of living faith as the conscious desire for Christ. But bearing in mind that John understands contemplative grace to be the realization of the mystery of our natural existence, it also holds in an analogous way for all. Whether in the informed darkness of contemplative faith or, more inchoately, in the sheer human need for salvation—or indeed of every mode of experience in between—it is Christ, always hidden, who is its goal and meaning.

There is for John another aspect of the christological form of our darkness, still more immediate. The indeterminacy of our 'unknowing', of our dark perception of the holy, is itself an experiential realization in us of the limitlessness of the divine Word. The undefined in us mirrors the infinitude in him. To dwell in a faith lacking the consolation of particular thoughts or images about Christ may in fact be a more profound way of knowing him—not just knowing about him, but identified with him as with incomprehensible Wisdom.

If the impediments and veils [of distinct forms] were completely removed, a person would then find himself in a condition of pure detachment and poverty of spirit and, being simple and pure, would be transformed into simple and pure Wisdom, which is the Son of God. (*Asc* II,15,4)

The intellectual formlessness of such faith is caused by the transcendent brightness of divine light—a more true way of experiencing God's personal Wisdom than any image or concept about him.

Finally, the ultimate vindication of our religious darkness is that Word which is not only divine but become human, Jesus, and specifically in the form in which he consummated his human existence, his death in darkness and desolation.

Solid and perfect spirituality consists in the annihilation of all sweetness in God, in aridity, distaste and stress, which is the true spiritual Cross and the detachment of the spiritual poverty of Christ. (*Asc* II,7,5)

John here speaks spontaneously of our poverty as a kind of identity with or participation in the mystery of Christ. Such a spiritual incorporation, so consistent with the teaching of the gospels and Paul, is ultimately far more convincing than trying to contrive one's existence in an extrinsic way as a copy of Jesus' existence. Authentic 'imitation of Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life' (*Asc* II,7,8; Jn 14:6) is only by way of 'following' him; it must be free, but freely *answering* his call, being drawn after him, into him, on his terms. Ultimately it is something that comes upon us, that is bestowed. Our part, John says, is to receive and willingly undergo what is not of our contriving, and always, as he repeats in a kind of litany, not for the sake of making something of oneself, but 'for Christ's sake', 'for God's sake'. It has to be so, because while there are essential elements of the dark night which are 'active'—willing renunciations, or 'the one act, general and pure', of the dark contemplative gaze—still the shadows in our existence that most crucially need to be redeemed are precisely our inabilities and sheer needs. The desolate experience of not being able to hold any image of Jesus as an illuminating object of prayer, of not being able to sense the golden meaning behind his silver-thin human words of hope—experiences such as these may still be undergone, astoundingly, 'for Christ's sake, for God's sake'. As such they constitute the most real experience of 'faith in the passion of Christ'—now subjectively, from within his abandonment.

At the moment of his death he was likewise reduced to nothing in his soul, without any consolation of relief, since the Father left him in innermost aridity. For which reason he was compelled to cry out, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' This was the greatest abandonment, sensitively, that he had suffered in his life. And by it he achieved the greatest work of his life, . . . to reconcile and unite the human race with God by grace. . . . The true spiritual person may understand the gate and the way of Christ leading to union with God, and might know that the measure of his being reduced to nothing for God's sake is the measure of his being united with God. (*Asc* II,7,11)

As R. S. Thomas says into the cold shadow of mere formlessness,

The shadow of the bent cross
is warmer than yours. I see how the sinners
of history run in and out
at its dark doors and are not confounded.¹⁰

NOTES

¹ *Apophthegmata patrum*: Evagrius.

² Pseudo-Dionysius: *Mystical theology* c 1. Cf *The complete works* (trans Colm Luibheid, New York: Paulist, 1987), p 135.

³ *The life of Moses* II, 163 (trans Malherbe and Ferguson, New York: Paulist, 1978), p 95.

⁴ *Poems of R. S. Thomas* (Fayetteville, University of Arkansas Press, 1985), p 118.

⁵ *Enneads* VI,9,11.

⁶ *The autobiography of Bertrand Russell* vol II (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1971), p 38. In a footnote added later (1967), Russell observes that this was no longer true of his experience.

⁷ Karl Rahner: *Foundations of Christian faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), p 216.

⁸ Pseudo-Dionysius: *The divine names*, c 2, 9, *op. cit.* p 65.

⁹ Cf the 'signs' that John proposes for discerning the shift from discursive meditation to contemplative prayer in *Asc* II,13 and *DNI*,9.

¹⁰ *Loc. cit.*